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One's Womenkind

A Novel



By

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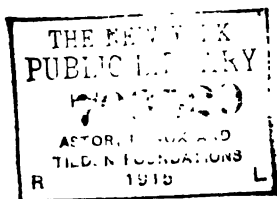


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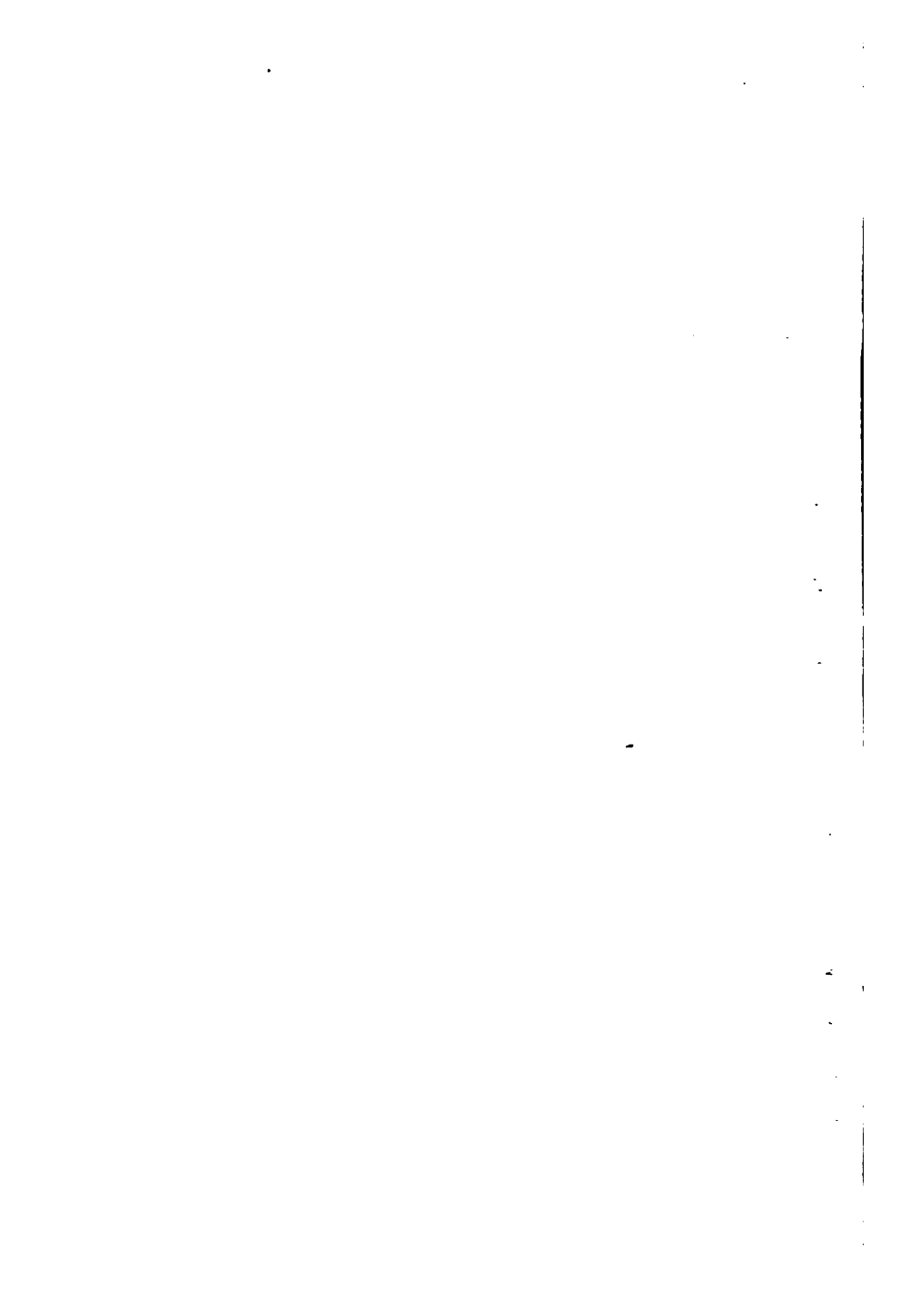
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Book I
The Bachelor



7 **THOUGH** they had already loitered on their way home from school, the two sisters could not help pausing once more to gaze at the sweet-stuffs ranged in great heaps behind the shining plate glass window.

"Have you ever tasted those pink-and-white things?" asked the six-year-old May, as her arm went round Gwenny and her big grey eyes shone with longing.

"No," replied the elder sister, sorrowfully mindful of the sweeping maternal ban on sweet-stuffs, though it was only almond-rock which was supposed to have last upset them; "but the yellow-and-white are nicer."

"You silly old Gwenny! How can you know—if you've never tasted them?" A laughing sparkle illumined the dimpled little face.

"The yellow-and-white are lemony," protested Gwenny indignantly; "and you always like lemon flavour best, you know you do."

"One can't go on liking the same thing the whole time," retorted May.

"You can if it's nice."

"*You* can, Gwenny. Never knew such a slow-coach."

Such criticism from a junior by a full twelve-month savoured of presumption. Gwenny was annoyed.

"All the same I can walk quicker than you," she said. "See!" And she began to move away briskly.

Gwenny was not much taller than her sister, having little to show for her extra twelve-month. Indeed, as both wore neat green frocks and white pinafores, there seemed at first sight little outward difference between them. Their features, however, offered a certain contrast. Gwenny was habitually grave and thoughtful, yet

her face was very sweet with its soft, perfect contours. Her hair was several degrees darker than May's, and her eyes were brown: not a common every-day brown, but a subtle beautiful brown that flashed into amber.

May, on the other hand, gave no hint of a meditative temperament. Her face was usually alight with fun, and, if for a moment she fell into thought, absurd wrinkles showed themselves on the tiny brow. She loved her sister, but she—the younger—prided herself on being the more wide-awake of the two. But the quieter Gwenny did not always submit to her patronage. To-day, indeed, she was stung into reading May a pretty lecture as they went along.

"I'm sure you don't know *what* you like. You're always wishing for new things and wanting to be rich and have servants to wait upon you. You know we're poor, and how can we ever get rich without a father?"

"Of course I shall be rich one day," said the younger sister confidently. "It's horrid to be always poor." A deep red spot burnt on either cheek.

"Don't be silly, May," said Gwenny. "You know mother has only what uncle gives her . . . I did so love father," she added after a slight pause, her eyes shining tearfully. "I can't believe he's really dead—it is so puzzling."

"You can't see any more, and you can't taste any more, and you can't talk any more, and then they bury you," said May, her face grown suddenly white. "And teacher says we must all die one day. Isn't it horrible?"

"But it's only father's body that died; his soul is still alive," put in Gwenny meditatively.

They walked on in silence. "I know!" cried May presently, with an air of announcing an inspiration. "Of course it's father's soul that's going to make us rich."

"Nonsense! There's no such thing as money in heaven!" pronounced Gwenny dogmatically.

"A soul can do anything," insisted May. "It can turn anything it likes into gold. Why, if a magician only touches the commonest substance with his wand, it changes into gold at once, and a magician isn't as high

as a soul. But I forgot. I can show you what heaven looks like. There are such beautiful colours."

She fumbled in her pinafore pocket and brought out a long glass prism. Gwenny stared at it suspiciously. Then, in a burst of recognition, "Where did you get that from?" she cried, horrified.

"I took it off one of the lustres," explained May calmly. "I turned that side towards the wall, so that mother won't miss it before I fix it on again. What a lovely spy-glass it makes! Just have a spy through it!"

"No, I will not," said Gwenny. "You had no right to touch it. Put it away!"

But May ignored the injunction, screwing up one eye and holding the prism to the other. "A-a-a-h-h!" she exclaimed rapturously.

Presently she held the prism to her sister's eye, and Gwenny was hypnotized into acceptance of the younger one's audacity.

"A-a-a-h-h!" she exclaimed in her turn, taking hold of it firmly. "Blue, green, yellow, red—and the whole street goes up like a hill . . . But suppose you should break it?"

"Don't look so frightened, Gwenny."

"I'm not frightened, but it isn't right; and if it *should* get smashed in two——"

"Why, then there'd be a spy-glass for each of us—and a beating besides! Who cares for a beating? Some girls are such cry-babies. You're not, Gwenny. But then you're so good, you never get beaten."

"A-a-a-h-h!" said Gwenny again, as they turned the corner of their own street. "How strange the people look!"

May held out her hand for the prism, and Gwenny passed it to her; but, before May's fingers had grasped it, Gwenny's had released their hold. As for the prism, it was dashed into five jagged pieces, to say nothing of the myriad irrecoverable fragments.

Gwenny looked rather solemn and was not in the least reassured by the laughter with which May presently greeted the catastrophe. Nor, indeed, was she at all

deceived, for May's cheeks were aflame and the ring in her laughter was of bravado.

"How can you?" she exclaimed, stooping to pick up the pieces.

"Oh, I don't care!" retorted May, refusing to abate one jot of her apparent unconcern. "Put them in my pinafore pocket . . . here!" And, Gwenny having obeyed her bidding, she began to dance gaily onwards. The elder sister followed conscience-stricken, and with blanched face.

The neighbourhood—the humbler side of a prosperous district of Northern London—was monotonous but strictly respectable; a harmless background enough for the growth of the two children. Besides, there was a park within easy reach, agreeably varying for them the topography of the quarter. Not that they were without knowledge of a larger world, still more richly varied. For, on occasion, they had been taken to have tea with their uncle, Mr. Hubert Ruthven, at his chambers in the Temple, and the omnibus ride down to the Strand was an experience to be remembered.

And when you arrived! What strange places had to be traversed! You went down a funny passage, and past a lovely romantic church, and then under such an odd assemblage of arches and pillars to get into the "playground"—so they designated the oblong, paved space of the venerable Pump Court—where uncle lived. Fancy trees growing down the middle out of the flagstones, and a pump right in the centre! Then you went up a few steps to a very dirty old doorway, with gentlemen's names painted down the sides, and passed through a dusty passage and up three dark flights of bare stairs on to a landing where there was a gas-light just like a street-lamp, only without the post. They did not at all approve of these last stages of the journey; they religiously believed the dust and grime were a "disgrace"—that being one of their mother's oft-expressed and most ardent convictions. It had always thrilled them with indignation to hear that Mr. Ruthven paid seven whole shillings a week extra to have his place kept

clean! They were, indeed, much concerned that his health was going to break down one day (though he never seemed to have the least idea of it himself); but he was always so kind and friendly that they didn't like to tell him about it.

Criticism, however, always ceased when his thick oak door swung open on its queer, elongated hinges, that were nailed right across it; and, as they passed in, they would cast a shy glance up at the three grotesque carved heads surmounting the archway that gave variety to the narrow corridor. Inside they would sit quiet as mice, not in awe of their uncle, but overwhelmed by the sense of "visiting" this important place.

Their mother, Mrs. Edward Ruthven, rented the upper part of a small house, sharing the kitchen below with the genteel person whose sub-tenant she was—that being the usual arrangement in the immediate district. She was proud of her little nest; she, at least, had no intention of putting up with dust and stuffiness, "as grand gentlemen apparently could." To-day the children found the front door on the jar, pushed it open, and went upstairs together, May anxious to meet the coming storm and have it over, Gwenny with a sense of accessoryship to the crime. They meant, of course, to confess their guilt at once, even should their mother's keen eye not yet have detected the damage. Mrs. Ruthven's regard for her household effects was religious. Deterioration that was fair wear and tear was a horror to her; wanton destruction unthinkable. Not of her might it be said, in the words of Pope, she was mistress of herself though china fell. On the lustres in particular she set a high value; they represented the æsthetic element in the home, and she would often pause before them to admire their richly-gilded crowns and their long, beautiful pendants. Gwenny and May had therefore no illusions about what was to follow.

They entered the sitting-room quietly. Mrs. Ruthven was not yet there, though a glance showed that the misdeed had already been discovered. The lustre in question had been turned again, and a yawning empti-

ness, as of a great tooth extracted, showed as the place of the missing pendant.

May took the broken pieces from her pocket and threw them on to the table. Gwenny's arm stole round her protectingly, the elder sister in her asserting itself.

"Never mind, dear," she said, trying to suppress a sob, the outcome, not of fear, but of the general emotion of the moment. "It will be all the same to-morrow."

In a moment they recognized their mother's step as she ascended from the kitchen. Presently she stood in the doorway, a pot of scalded tea in one hand, a jug of hot water in the other. She was a tall, half-faded woman of thirty, though she looked fully five years older. Brooding discontent with her lot had set its mark on her, so that the faults of her face had come to be over-accentuated. The forehead was too broad, the chin too narrow, the cheek-bones a trifle pronounced. Yet, in the first freshness of youth, with her fine grey eyes and a really good neck—which still rose gracefully from her dark stuff dress—she had been attractive enough.

She set down the jug and teapot on the table. Her hands were large and coarsened by household work, the golden symbols of her progress from maidenhood towards motherhood shining in marked contrast to the red flesh. There was an ominous deliberateness about her movements.

As the girls had lingered on their way home, her accumulated anger had been feeling itself foiled. Which made her even angrier.

"Oho!" she cried, as her eye, catching sight of the shapeless fragments, spat fire at both of them.

"I'm so sorry, mother," said Gwenny. "It's all my fault. I did not mean to break it. It was an accident."

"I'll give you an accident!" screamed Mrs. Ruthven, smacking her face hard. "You little imp of mischief."

Gwenny trembled a little and her eyes grew sorrowfully big, but no tear showed itself.

"It wasn't Gwenny's fault at all," spoke up May. "I

took the spy-glass—because it made such lovely colours on the wall when the sun shone.”

“Oh—it was you, was it?” Mrs. Ruthven took a menacing step forward. “You were always the mischievous one. There is just a taste for you to go on with, and, at bed-time, won’t you just catch it, my lady—you’ll see.”

May received the blow meekly, conscious of deserving the finger-marks on her cheek, though not at all relishing the accompanying assurance of further punishment to follow.

But Mrs. Ruthven’s temper having found relief in castigation, her resentment began to flow into words, the while she proceeded to cut their bread-and-butter. The children listened silently, feeling themselves monsters, as their mother descanted on their constant roughness towards the home in contrast with the loving care she always bestowed on it. The way they *would* keep putting their feet on the bars of chairs, and scratching and scraping them, was enough to make one’s heart bleed. Not infrequently, she asserted, *she had caught them standing on chairs*, and she had a mournful prevision of hollow places worn in the wood. She recalled to them definite instances of their guilt (as if adequate reproach had not been meted out as the occasions had arisen). And now not even the lustres were safe from their mischievous hands. Other mothers had pleasure from their children, she had only heart-burn. And how she was going to match the broken pendant, Heaven alone knew.

“There is something in my money-box,” suggested Gwenny. “And if it isn’t enough, you could keep back my spending-money for some time.”

“I’ll think about it,” said Mrs. Ruthven, in whom the still visible marks on the children’s faces now created some remorse. “It would serve you right if I did,” she added, to maintain a show of severity.

A silence fell upon the room. May sipped her tea with guilty remembrance of a neglected money-box somewhere on a top shelf. Heroic resolutions to begin

saving from that moment were surging in her mind despite the breakdown of past attempts—though, to be sure, a farthing a day had scarcely afforded much margin for economies.

However, the storm had now blown over, and, before very many minutes had passed, the mercurial May had completely recovered her spirits, and did not even take seriously the flogging that had been threatened for bed-time. But Gwenny still sat with downcast face, brooding over the sins of the past, and casting every now and again a remorseful glance at the imperfect lustre.

TEA was well-nigh over when the little family was surprised by a visitor. But, if his coming that afternoon was unexpected, his rap at the door was familiar enough, and the children immediately jumped up with a joyous shout of "Uncle!"

Mr. Hubert Ruthven entered, put his stick in a corner, and his tall silk hat on a chair. He shook hands with his sister-in-law, and kissed and fondled the children. From the way in which they threw off all repression, and danced and laughed with delight, it was evident how much he stood for in their lives. A frown stole over their mother's face.

"Don't make such a noise, children. You will give Mr. Ruthven a headache." At the same time she was nervous lest he should notice anything amiss with their faces.

"The noisier the better, Agnes," said Hubert, laughing, and drawing the two little ones closer to him. He caressed their hair, and patted their cheeks.

"A cup of tea," suggested Agnes.

"Thanks. I am really thirsty. It's a tedious journey from the Temple."

He drew over a chair, and sat down near the table. But he did not see the frown that again passed over the mother's face as Gwenny and May came and stood one on each side of him. At last, Agnes, impatient to hear the wherefore of his appearance, bade the children go into the next room. "I dare say your uncle has something to talk over with me," she added; "and you, Gwenny, have your lessons to do."

Hubert did not oppose the dismissal, so the girls rose

to obey ; May, who had not yet attained to the stage of home-lessons, taking a volume of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* with her. Nevertheless, they were loath to go, for a conference between the elders had always a fascination for them, and they were usually allowed to be present the whole time during Hubert's visits.

Indeed, not only were they, as a rule, admitted to conferences relating to the family affairs ; but their mother, in her bitterer moods, would pour out to them her own distorted vision of things—the hardness of their lot in the world, the harsh injustice of their father's mother, who had never recognized her, and had always refused to see her, saying she had entrapped her son and ruined his life ; whereas she called Heaven to witness she had never encouraged him, and was only coerced into marrying him by his threatening to shoot himself if she refused. She would always curse the day when the young gentleman came to lodge in her poor mother's house. Such a confidential disquisition on her part was the usual immediate sequel to Hubert's visits, which were thus also associated in the children's minds with after-periods of maternal gloom.

"I suppose you are wondering why I've come to-day," he began—for, in the ordinary course of events, his regular visit and cheque would not be due for another fortnight or so.

"You wouldn't have come unless you had a reason," she returned, unwilling to be charmed into graciousness by the fascination of his presence—his dark, handsome face with its deep-set black eyes, his gentle manner, his soft polished voice, his stylish clothes. She felt all this as marking the superiority of his clan to hers.

"I admit I *have* a reason," he said, smiling. "But come, you surely don't mean to complain of neglect on my part."

"Complain !" she said scornfully. "I never complain."

"Of course you were not complaining," he conceded good-naturedly, trying to soothe her out of her obvious hostility. "I am so sorry, Agnes. Life hasn't exactly been a bed of roses for you."

"No, that it hasn't," she agreed.

"I am so sorry," he repeated, sincerely full of pity for her. He was too large-hearted to be vexed at her general air of hostility, understanding her limitations, and tolerating her troublesome pride at being dependent on him. He, at least, had never borne her any ill-will for marrying his younger brother, though that event had undoubtedly proved the calamity of poor Edward's early-closed life. From the beginning he had recognized, in distinct opposition to his mother, that Agnes was quite blameless. If a medical student of twenty chooses to lose his head over his landlady's daughter, it does not follow she is a designing person who has entangled him in her net. Unfortunately the old Mrs. Ruthven, entrenched far away in the country, would not reason that way, and her hatred for her undesired daughter-in-law had depths which the latter alone divined in her most morbid moments. Hubert's mother, in fact, was one of those persons whose ardent prejudices create new tragedy besides intensifying what already exists; and when, after Edward's death, she, already wounded by Hubert's lenient attitude throughout, passionately declared he must leave Agnes and her "brats" to their own devices or never come near her again, he bowed his head to the necessity for such an estrangement. To Agnes he had never said anything about the quarrel.

Her reply to-day was characteristic.

"Don't you be unhappy on my account," she said. "It's enough my own life is miserable, and, if it weren't for the children——"

He knew from experience the sequence of plaintive phrases of which her tongue had acquired the habit.

"Don't be a goose," he interrupted airily. "Things are going to be different now. You and the children must have a better time in future."

Now that he had come to the point, he stopped a moment to collect his ideas. She did not betray any impatience, but sat waiting with a studied indifference.

"I mean this," he resumed slowly, hoping she would listen without interrupting. "As you know, I have never

had any fortune to help me. My mother, impoverished through various causes that I need not dwell upon, had to pinch for years to give us boys a decent education and a start in life. It took me years at the bar before I could depend on the most modest income. It is only during the last two or three that things have at all shown any improvement. Of late, in fact, I have been going up—up—up, all of a rush somehow. So I mustn't complain. No doubt it is somewhat of an achievement now-a-days for a man who wishes to live honourably and shun intrigue and flattery and every kind of mean trick to feel himself fairly afloat at my age—I am thirty-five, you know. To come then to my point. You know how much I have always cared for the children. Well, for years I have been exercised about their future. Till now what I've been able to spare has been little enough. Don't look so cross, please! I have always been grateful to you for not refusing me the chance of doing what I could for them."

She needed careful handling. Often when he came with the usual cheque she would make a show of refusal, vowing she and her children must not be a burden on him any longer. (Whilst the reluctance, which she permitted him each time to override, was no doubt sincere at the moment, she would next day proceed to lay out the money quite cheerfully, regarding it as legitimate income.)

Having warded off the threatened interruption, he was able to explain himself further and impress upon Agnes his anxiety that the children should at once benefit by his modest prosperity, that they should get a good education and refined surroundings. They promised to be beautiful, and they showed great intelligence. Why should they not have their opportunities when it was in his power to afford them such? "I want them to live full and happy lives, and it would be a great happiness to me to see their talents developed. Of course just now I can only give you my ideas in the most general way, but the beginning, at any rate, seems clear. You must move to a pretty little house and get some nice

furniture. For a time the girls could be educated at home. As for the future, we must feel our way as time goes on."

The first flow of ideas exhausted, Hubert stopped, ready for a certain amount of captious opposition; but he counted, as usual, on getting his way. Agnes seemed to be reflecting a moment. He noticed that she was trembling as if from the effort of collecting and concentrating her thoughts preparatory to a great pouring-forth. Her colour deepened, and the lines about her mouth grew more distinctly marked. Her eyes were feverishly alight. In that moment when all the life in her seemed to be gathered in her face, Hubert felt the old vanished prettiness behind a veil of something that was hideous and twitching. He had a sense of the infinite pathos of things, knowing now he had struck with all his might on the chord of her being.

"I expected you would come to me like this one day," she said at length; "and that we'd have to find out exactly how we meant to go on. There are things that had better be said straight out, and that I always knew would have to be said. Well, the principal thing I want you to understand is that the children are *my* children, and mine they are going to remain. It's all very fine talking so grand about their education and their future, but I don't want them one day to look down on their mother and be ashamed of her. I've suffered enough already from grand people looking down on me, and I'm not going to have my own children turn against me. As for learning and surroundings, what was good enough for me is good enough for them. Their lives are quite safe in my hands, and I'd rather die this minute than let anybody else get hold of them and poison them against me."

Hubert protested the innocence of his intentions, but she rose and faced him with folded arms.

"Don't you think I can't see through the dodge. If you and your mother think you are going to dazzle me with your pretty houses and furniture so as to do me out of my children sooner or later, you are very much

mistaken. You belong to one world and we belong to another, and I long ago learnt the mistake of having anything to do with people different from those one is born and bred among. It only leads to heart-ache."

He had scarcely foreseen the line she had adopted. Of course her suspicion that he deliberately meant to wean her children away from her was ridiculous, but he had to admit to himself that her perception of the possibilities of the future was shrewd enough. His face fell.

"I shall certainly not sell my children," she resumed, conscious of possessing what "the others" coveted, and further fortified by the thought of the hoard, put together penny by penny, that was hidden in her chest-of-drawers—possible capital for a lodging-house of her own. "If it wasn't out of consideration for *your* feelings, I shouldn't accept a penny even now. I am still strong and hearty, thank God, and there is always work for a sober, respectable woman. I'm not ashamed to do it, though, of course, a gentleman in your position must not allow his sister-in-law to soil herself with honest work—to say nothing of the feelings of a certain high-and-mighty lady."

"I am sorry you attribute such motives to me," he began. Then, remembering that argument would only be wasted on her, "Won't you tell me your own ideas about the children?" he preferred to ask.

"They must earn their own livings, as I did. It won't lose their souls for them if they serve behind the counter. And when the time comes I want them to marry respectable, hard-working mechanics. They'll be happier with workmen than I was with a gentleman."

Agnes could not resist the chance of sarcasm. In her heart she had higher dreams for her girls, aspiring to shop-keepers. Hubert did not know that her sense of social differences was deeper than his own, and that she boasted to the neighbours of her high connections through her husband.

"Besides," she continued, taking her seat again and falling into a more conciliatory intonation, as if to show that, though there might be differences between them, she was a perfectly reasonable and pleasant person to deal with; "it isn't as if I can always go on expecting you to provide for them. After all you'll be wanting to get settled yourself one day. A man can't always remain a bachelor."

She was unable to disguise her eagerness to draw from him some statement.

Hubert was taken aback. It was clear that the subject had been occupying her thoughts and he felt almost unreasonably resentful. What right had a person like that—for he, despite all his free-spirited tolerance, was conscious of the great gap between their inner selves—to attempt to discuss his life with him! What could her gross nature understand of his nature and his needs?

But he would not be otherwise than gentle with her, and contented himself with leaving her hint unnoticed.

"It will be always my business—and my pleasure—to provide for the children, and you may take it for granted that nothing would interfere with that."

"You think so now," she returned in a tone that indicated an immense grasp of life. "The sort of woman you'd be likely to marry would spend money faster than you could earn it. You don't know what it costs to keep a fine lady in dresses so that she may always look like a picture. Do you think she would continue to care for you if you couldn't keep up her grand house and give her all the dresses she wanted! Those women are all selfish and heartless—they are brought up to be selfish from the day of their birth. She wouldn't consider you if she couldn't get *her* way. They are sweet and nice so long as they *do* get their way, but God help the man who marries one of them if he has to work for his money."

"I have no intention of marrying!" said Hubert shortly.

"Ah, that's what you say now," persisted Agnes; "but a man always wants to settle down. You can't go on living all alone in those rooms. I'm sure they never get a proper turning-out from one year's end to another, and that woman taking seven shillings a week! Yes, *I'd* give her seven shillings a week—I'd break her neck out of the place! And as for that ragged felt on the floor, why it hasn't been taken up and beaten for a century, I lay. Faugh! I like everything sweet and clean, I do. And what would you do if you were suddenly taken ill,—all alone there? Why, a man might keep on calling out, and be dead before anybody heard him!" She paused only to shudder, then resumed immediately: "And, as I say, you wouldn't care about marrying in the way poor Edward did—a poor respectable girl, who had plenty of spirit and good looks, too, and who knew how to make a shilling go as far as anybody. You'd look for something grander. And would your wife care about us? Would she give up a single dress for our sake? Would she deny herself the least trifle she'd set her heart on? A nice thing, indeed, if the children had got used to luxuries. Whereas, as things are now, I could always earn my bit of bread."

Hubert had resigned himself to hearing her out, steadfastly refraining from taking up the theme. He pretty well understood the twists of her thoughts and emotions, so perceived that the question of his marriage must have been troubling her all along; despite her odd pride, her dependence upon him—in the eyes of her world an independence—had become so established a fact, that, even whilst she rebelled against it, she dreaded the loss of it.

He rose to bring the visit to an end. "Perhaps you care to think it over," he suggested, glancing at his watch. "I am sorry I must hurry away now. I know you'll excuse my going so soon, but I have an engagement."

She was rather taken aback at this announcement as she was just beginning to warm to her disquisition,

and was prepared to continue indefinitely. But, of course, she could only call the children to say good-bye.

"Did you enjoy your story, May?" he asked.

"Rather! The walls of the witch's house were made of barley-sugar and you could break lumps off the window-sill and eat them! Wasn't that fine?"

III

THE engagement put forward by Hubert was no imaginary one. He had been collecting a few pounds from friends for an old law-clerk out of employment, now reduced to a Bishopsgate doss-house, and on the verge of going still lower. He had come a little into relation with the man, who had often had to call at his chambers with documents; and Hubert, who never dismissed an appeal unconsidered, had found the case sufficiently genuine to enlist his good offices. The incident was one such among many, and Hubert had quite a clientèle who preferred to give their half-crowns through him rather than at random. He had told the poor man to call at his chambers at eight, and, of course, he could not allow the temptation of lingering with the children to lead him into inflicting a disappointment.

In Pump Court he found the man already waiting about for him. Soon he had handed over what he had been able to get together, and dismissed the recipient with a few sympathetic words. There were papers he had to look through during the evening, but he felt too depressed to touch them yet. So, abandoning the idea of his club as a boredom, he went to seek consolation by whiling away an hour at a bookseller's near by. As, later on, it occurred to him he ought to eat something, he carried off two tattered volumes that had tempted him, and entered the nearest place of refreshment to dine on a sandwich and a cup of coffee—not because there was any appetite to satisfy but just to feel he was dining.

Frankly his conference with Agnes had disappointed him keenly. He was not merely checked in the execution of the plan on which he had set his heart; it

looked as if he must abandon it altogether. There seemed nothing but to drift on as at present.

He returned to the Temple, got his papers from his business room on the ground floor, then gloomily climbed the flights of stairs to the chambers he had occupied now for several years. His sitting-room, the ancient wainscoting of which had been repainted over by his predecessor in a sort of creamy white, was comfortable enough in its rough-and-ready way, yet not without a certain refinement. The books with which it was packed formed its dominant feature; here and there they had accumulated in disorderly heaps. A good-sized table, topped with leather, arm-chairs that were more voluptuous than beautiful, a large Dutch cabinet-escritoire, exuberantly inlaid and bulging, and an old Frisian clock, made up the principal furniture of the room, and were supplemented by a few sketches and prints and bibelots that added agreeably to the feeling of the ensemble. There was little specifically to suggest the lawyer. The greater part of his legal library was below in his business room, and the books here pointed rather to a wide general culture, the number of worm-eaten calf bindings indicating a habit of ferreting in old bookshops.

To the eye of his brethren Hubert cut a fairly interesting figure. He was known not merely as an able practitioner on the Chancery side, occupying himself more with chamber than with Court work, and distinctly on the rise, but likewise as one who had employed the years of waiting to such good purpose that he had made a reputation by much first-class work in the serious magazines on social and political topics. In cultured democratic circles—for his creed was advanced liberalism—he was favourably known as a capable and enthusiastic exponent of their ideals; and at that period—it was in the early eighties—those ideals looked as if they might one day become respectable. He had the name of being reserved in many respects, for few knew much about him personally. It was taken for granted, however, that his bachelor existence in the Temple was bound to come to an end sooner or later,

and that he would probably blossom some day into a Queen's Counsel and a member of Parliament. But Hubert was not deeply touched by these conventional ambitions. He loved learning and he loved philanthropy more than anything else in the world; regretted his limited time for the one and his limited power for the other. He knew well the darker sides of London; had explored its slums and its doss-houses, had studied its problems of work and poverty with passionate sympathy. Of all careers that of quiet service to humanity touched him as the noblest.

Though unconcerned with caste, Hubert could trace back his descent for many generations. His ancestors had belonged to the yeoman class sturdy of character and endowed with serviceable every-day abilities; obtuse in many directions, yet with a strong sense of justice; oaken temperaments, austere taskmasters, that had waxed hearty over their home-brewed ale. His grandfather had held quite a respectable estate, and his father, advancing still further in gentility with a university education, had married the incumbent's daughter. The university education, however, seemed to have proved fatal. The estate did not prosper in his hands, and he died when the boys were still young, having muddled through practically the whole of it. Hubert and his brother grew up in the belief that their mother had been left in much reduced circumstances and was making sacrifices to give them professions that counted. She still occupied the same modest country house as of yore, entirely immersed in local interests, and nursing a bitterness that her early hopes for her sons had borne so little fruit. She was over sixty now and her mind had acquired an iron fixity. She had been brought up in a rigid tory tradition, and her sons had broken her heart between them; the younger by marrying beneath him, the other by his outrageous democratic principles published so openly.

Not that Mrs. Ruthven gave up Hubert immediately as lost when she realized what he had developed into. She was hurt and angry, but too masterful a spirit not

to attempt to reclaim him. She proceeded straight to the attack as soon as she had him to herself, and there was a crude attempt to thresh out first principles between them. How could any intelligent mind, he asked (forced to turn at bay before her onslaught), continue to believe that nature was to be imposed upon by the social arrangements of feudalism, and, in its creation of choice souls, was to be coerced into dumping them down within certain assigned limits. A choice soul was always better than a coarse one, whether within or without the pale of caste.

"So you contend that all men are equal," she exclaimed, scandalized.

"No, indeed. All human beings are by no means equal, only their inequalities do not find a true embodiment in your feudalism. We want a thorough overhauling of the ranks. You, mother, should be a duchess at the least."

But she was deaf to blandishment, and only put out her bristles the more against this unfamiliar morality of his. "How horribly vulgar!" she exclaimed. "You'll be wanting to abolish the throne next."

There followed many such passages-at-arms between the two, for Mrs. Ruthven did not hesitate to pit herself against Hubert, resentful that her maternal authority had no control over his reason and convictions. The relations between them would have been strained to breaking-point even earlier had she not got the queer idea into her head that Hubert had evolved these principles in order to obscure the enormity of his brother's marriage. So she had yet hopes he would alter his ways of thinking.

Money relations between them had, of course, ceased long before this. Hubert had been too much impressed by her forced economies not to hasten his self-dependence, and it was little enough he had had to subsist on during his early days in London. He had not *dared* to be a failure in life. He had worked terribly, burning his lamp till the dawn shamed it. What wonder if he had been blind to Edward's infatua-

tion! He remembered his dismay at hearing of the marriage a fortnight after it had taken place. Of course he had felt bound to help the couple as best he could till Edward could find a minor post in a hospital at a small salary. The years had gone by, Edward dying in his arms, weakened by overwork and worry, an easy victim of pneumonia. Since then a permanent strain of sadness had entered into his life, for he had always felt an almost paternal responsibility towards his brother who had depended on him much in boyhood, and he had loved him with a deep and protecting affection. Edward's family had at once become his care—that was a duty he assumed as a matter-of-course, though it was immediately called into question by his mother who henceforth regarded poor Agnes as her son's murderer. Then had come the regrettable break between mother and son.

Beyond the large vague floating acquaintanceship and the one or two intimate friendships of an intelligent barrister, thrown together with crowds of men by the common accident of bachelorhood, Hubert had no very definite social anchorage. His experience of London life had been straggling and chaotic. In the earlier days he had participated a little in the usual amusements about town, and he had found a welcome at all sorts of houses—at centres of artistic and intellectual light; in pretentious nondescript drawing-rooms where one moved in an atmosphere of pseudo-princesses and marchese and palmists and vendors of complexion-tonics and spiritualists and unknown singers who were to take London by storm one day; at "mansions" in Bayswater or the suburbs where smart-looking young men danced with girls who enjoyed themselves with ecstasy and talked much of the season and going out to parties.

At this epoch, too, he had indulged in those eager wanderings in the obscurer far-stretching quarters of London, which, at first undertaken by way of mere agreeable variation from these other distractions, had ended by fascinating him altogether and exercising an important influence on his whole mind.

To these wanderings he was still addicted when he had the leisure, but he had long since forsworn dancing, and, with social circles of any kind, he had, in these latter years, been losing touch more and more; his defection in this respect having really first begun at the time of a disappointment in love.

For Hubert, too, had had his love affair. But he had had the misfortune to fall among Philistines (or perhaps good fortune rather, for, meeting the girl afterwards when she was a wife of several years' standing, he could not at all make out why she had once fascinated him). Be it as it may, the family had certainly fought shy of a struggling barrister. They preferred to abide by the good old chivalrous rule that a man must not expect a woman to come into his life till his struggle is over. His own far-off crown of success shone with but a faint yellow gleam of gold across the intervening dark spaces. So, under parental pressure, the rosy daughter of the Philistines broke off the semi-engagement. It was a commonplace affair and did not matter now. The experience, nevertheless, had helped his perception of the world.

And, brought every day face to face with the facts of life, Hubert had schooled himself to a deep patience and a large tolerance. Of course he was no visionary. To his sympathetic appreciation of the finer shades of life was joined a practical acquaintance with its "common-sense" aspect. Impostors did not fare well at his hands. And ardent democrat though he was, his philosophy was no shallow optimism. He did not believe in a millennium to be secured by the pressing of electric buttons. He frankly perceived that, whereas moral aspiration might be unlimited, moral performance must be limited by natural facts and conditions; and he felt it his clear duty to recognize those conditions and facts with the hope that human life might improve up to the utmost limits possible.

Meanwhile, apart from his professional advancement, Hubert was not satisfied that he was making very much out of his own life! It seemed to be just going on,

to be leading absolutely to nothing; and it was the longing to feel in his existence something substantial and human that had urged him towards the idea of a closer personal relation with Edward's children. As he had told Agnes, he did not himself think of marrying now. Year after year (in which his annual surplus had been of the slenderest after those ever-insistent tiresome ends had been brought together) had had an unassuming way of slipping by, and the habit of not falling in love, once acquired, is not easily broken.

In his case not only was there this habit to be reckoned with, but life now did not even foster the idea of marriage by offering plausible possibilities; so that, when he thought about it at all, marriage seemed absurdly difficult. He had indeed once or twice amused himself by reasoning the whole subject out—half seriously, half self-banteringly. The ideal girl for a man like himself must be one with a soul above conventional luxuries, with ability to manage on his moderate earnings, and sufficient good sense to be satisfied with the simple (though not sordid) mode of living thus involved. He would prefer her to be beautiful, and she must be highly cultivated and sufficiently clever for him to admire and be proud of her. (Of course she must have formed for herself democratic ideas.) She must be sweet-natured and kind-hearted and patient to a fault; not likely to forget duty in pursuing pleasure, and neither letting the humble details of daily life gain entire possession of her soul, nor unduly imagining her soul to be entirely above them.

Now he would have wanted to marry such a woman for love, and she must also be in love with him; and so surprising a simultaneity of inclination appeared to him highly improbable. Besides, in the limited opportunities afforded of studying this or that woman in the ordinary social course, one could never be quite sure that one had come across the sort of woman one really wanted. Quite apart from the mutual falling-in-love, the mutual pitching, in fact, on just the right person would be nothing less than miraculous. But

even assuming this miraculous point to have been reached, the immediate outlook might easily be most fearful to contemplate; for, in reality, one married not merely an individual but a whole environment, full of traditions, religions, prejudices, troubles, dissensions and people, with all of which one might be violently out of harmony, and absorption into which one might have to resist with one's whole might. But that was letting one's thoughts run away with one, for how could one ever get so far as that? How could a mature man put himself in the impossibly ridiculous position of being the marked wooer of a particular woman in a particular family, with probably a pompous father with dogmatic tendencies where he was most ignorant, and a pseudo-fashionable mother with a monstrous interest in countesses and duchesses. Then, of course, there would be a swarm of brothers and sisters, besides all sorts of strange friends and relatives whom one would stumble up against in the household—amiable snobbish idiots to whom one would have to be cordial. Hubert's hair stood on end as his imagination, assisted by his one experience, figured out all these likelihoods.

No, he could not face anything like that! And perhaps it was just as well he couldn't, he argued, for you could never really tell how *any* marriage would turn out. The woman might hate you in the end for not making enough money, however romantic the notions with which she might be starting. Such cases had, indeed, come under his own observation. Then there was the danger of her developing into a shrew and making your life miserable. Or she might possess a tragic temperament and constantly threaten to take poison, or want to go on the stage, or elope with somebody else.

No doubt a suitable mate existed for him somewhere, and the mating might even have been mentioned in heaven; but he could not emulate the knights of mediæval legend and fare forth in quest of her. As his friend Preston put it: now-a-days to achieve marriage required positive genius, whereas formerly it required genius not

to achieve it. Besides, marriage seemed to involve a deliberate stopping and a recommencement of life. Such a forcible applying of the brake gave him much too violent a wrench, even as a mere idea. So one day Hubert was much relieved to find he had become permanently reconciled to bachelorhood.

To-night, when Hubert had gone through his papers and put them aside, he was glad to lie back languidly in his arm-chair. The hour's mental effort had taken him out of himself but now his thoughts made free play again.

He realized he was frightfully depressed. Evidently it had shaken him more than he had thought—this determination of Agnes to stand between him and the children. His affection for them astonished himself. He felt their cheeks pressing against his, the touch of their little hands, the freshness of their hair, the sweetness of their voices that had in them something akin to the sweetness of spring.

Again he was holding them to his heart, these children of his brother; May, so full of spirit, Gwenny, so grave in her beautiful child's way!

He longed for them with an infinite tenderness!

The blank uniformity of lonely years to come thrust a bleakness into the rooms. Agnes was right; but what change could ever come in his life now?

Well, so let it be. He would think of nothing but his labour from day to day. As well moulder here as elsewhere!

And with a spasm of the heart he thought again of his mother and all the unnecessary bitterness she had caused in his life and hers by her obdurate demand for his implicit submission, and by her hatred of these children, off-spring of a *mésalliance* that had ruined and destroyed her son.

Hubert groaned. "If only Preston were to come to-night to cheer me up!" he murmured.

There was an irregular characteristic plying of his knocker just then.

IV

It was Mr. Robert Preston himself.

"I hope you were thinking of me," he said, as they shook hands.

"I was invoking you in my misery," Hubert assured him.

"The devil!" exclaimed Preston. "You haven't taken advantage of my absence to fall in love behind my back?"

"Oh, I've been in love for ever so long now."

"Delighted to learn you are so prosperous, but I'd rather you had chosen some other way of informing me."

"There are insuperable difficulties."

"You relieve me considerably!" He fell into a chair.

Robert Preston was some three or four years younger than Hubert, and his appearance defied every other classification save that of smart man of the world. He was the chief recreation of Hubert's life. His whimsical talk was always a tonic, for a more expert juggler with ideas could scarcely have existed. He was splendidly built, yet slim and as perfectly tailored as any dandy. His features were frank and pleasant, his eyes keen-glancing, his teeth perfect; and he wore a close-cropped brown beard that suited him remarkably. Sprig of an important old family, the various branches of which had seats all over the Western counties, he was in the happy position of being a younger son with a moderate fortune of his own; with every hereditary advantage and no hereditary burdens. But he was not in favour with his clan. He had gone his own way and thought his own thoughts; had avoided universities and

degrees; had not entered either of the services, or desired to follow a learned or any other kind of profession. Nor had he manifested any political ambitions, or the least flicker of interest in the affairs of his county. He had never written a book or a magazine article or even a poem. He could fence and shoot and ride, but he would not hunt, and he avoided the cricket and football fields. He puzzled the family though they had long given up the puzzle. So far as they had any definite ideas about him, they had somehow formed the conception that he was a bizarre personality, weirdly clever if only one could get to know him; and that he was somewhat of a renegade, though he had never been known to express any social or political convictions, or to throw himself into any movement. But he had practically cut them all, despite the unimpeachability of their honourable standing; and they more or less resented his existence, and even more than his existence the strange mental superiority which they could not help attributing to him, and which they morbidly felt to be holding them in unrighteous contempt. It was no wonder that his attitude made them a little restive; it was the first insinuation for centuries that they might not be so absolutely of the salt of the universe. So, not quite sure that he wasn't a disgrace to the family, they, with well-bred discretion, evaded the perplexity by dismissing him as "eccentric."

In town the Preston clan, punctiliously fashionable in its arrivals and departures, was in evidence everywhere. It had contributed, from its endless ramifications, permanent officials to the Government offices, colonels and majors to the army, captains to the navy, secretaries to the legations, and incumbents to the Church; nay, though of the usual undistinguished yet unexceptionable sort characteristic of the blood, even one or two ministers to Cabinets. Brothers and sisters of Preston's, all married—for he was the celibate of the family—all urbane and prosperous, bloomed in large conventional establishments all over Mayfair and Kensington. All the bearded brothers seemed alike (stouter

and ruddier than the renegade) whether strolling up Piccadilly, or out driving with their sleek, well-dressed wives in faultless shining equipages, or as endlessly reduplicated in the large maroon arm-chairs of the club-windows; and all the discreetly married sisters seemed alike, whether emerging into the sunshine from the cool gloom of charming interiors, between rows of servants, to go a round of visiting, or graciously acknowledging from their carriages the salutes of speckless club-men lounging smartly along the Bond-street pavement, or presiding in large dim drawing-rooms at whispered conversation over tea-cups under soft silk lamp-shades.

One of the sisters, however, who lived far off in North Wales, had some affinity with Robert, and there was a strange sympathy and affection between the two. He would often stop with her at all sorts of odd times when he desired to slip away from London. From such a trip, in fact, he had just returned, for his sister had not come up to town that season, being too interested in certain pet dairy schemes she had initiated on her estate to be drawn away from them at a critical moment.

He looked sceptical at Hubert's confession though impressed by his obvious languor.

"I came here to indulge in the luxury of getting pitied myself," he grumbled. "I go down to Flintshire for an agreeable fortnight, and I find Marian all bacteriology and butter . . . I stood out against the bacteriology but I couldn't get let off the butter anyhow. I had to keep tasting and making ecstatic faces the whole time, to say nothing of the quarts of curds and whey forced down my gullet. Marian is delightful if one is lucky enough to catch her *in between* two enthusiasms. Ultimately I fled to you for refuge."

"You know where the whisky is," said Hubert promptly. "And please give me some as well."

Preston readily complied. "My sister sends you a message, by the way. You are to let me bring you down to spend the vacation with her. I promised to come myself if I could induce you to. The butter will

probably have quieted down a little by then. I hope your insuperably difficult love affair won't stand in the way."

"Not at all. I am delighted at the idea."

"Bravo! Flintshire will cure you. There's nothing more melancholy—save perhaps an overdose of curds and whey—than hanging about the skirts of a woman who doesn't care for you. A woman either turns her back on you or falls into your arms; it is only with an effort she can be civil to a man she feels indifferent about."

"Let us not talk about women. Did we not agree ever so long ago that the subject palled?"

"Don't forget the only other thing in the universe about which we have ever agreed—that matrimony is too risky for contemplation. The only positive advantage about it I could ever see is the opportunity it affords for discarding one's old dressing-bag."

"As symbolic, I suppose, of the disreputable trappings of bachelorhood," said Hubert, smiling. He had a vision of the veteran portmanteau—battered and scarred by a hundred campaigns—that went forwards and backwards between Jermyn-street and Flintshire. "But I don't contemplate any such extravagant proceeding. There are only two little girls."

"So that's the insuperable difficulty—bigamy!"

"I only want to be a sort of father to them."

Preston looked puzzled again and then guessed. "Ah! You want to adopt your brother's kids."

Hubert smiled. "Well, pretty nearly. I want them at any rate to have a chance in life. But the mother stands in the way. She fears it might lead to her ultimately losing them."

"Poor devil!" said Preston. "I suppose she wants them to grow up to be of her sort. Better let them alone."

"There's scarcely anything else to do," said Hubert ruefully. "But I rather set my heart on seeing more of them and educating them properly. To tell the truth I've been planning the thing out rather elaborately."

They are beautiful children, with nice soft little cheeks and bright hair and pretty ways, and I'm terribly disgusted at having the idea knocked on the head. The mother was simply great—she rose to the occasion."

Preston reflected. "From what you've told me about her, I should say she is one of those persons who are great on great occasions and a nuisance at all other times."

"Oh, I can't reasonably complain, only I was so set on the idea."

"In imagination you were already teaching them the multiplication table," said Preston good-humouredly. "And now life with the multiplication table left out seems a barren and futile thing."

Hubert laughed. "Seriously the outlook is bleak. I feel very gloomy. I should be happier if I could only feel things were going to be all right for the children. You know I am reasonably philosophic, but this is the first thing for years I really wanted—wanted with that ridiculous intensity with which the average person usually wants things."

"Poor chap! Let me give you some more whisky. Don't look so awful—drink, sing—anything! You said you were invoking me, and, now that the devil *has* appeared, you won't sell your soul to him. You know I've always *had* designs on your soul."

"You know I can't sing," said Hubert; "but I'll whistle instead."

He screwed up his mouth and chirruped feebly.

"Stop, stop!" cried Preston; "that doesn't sound at all natural. You are evidently in a bad way."

"I am. I wish I were dead." Hubert lay back in his chair apathetically.

"What an awful mess your books are in!" exclaimed Preston with a sudden sly inspiration. He rose and pretended to be interested in the book-shelves.

"There's really nothing to fill up life with," said Hubert, ignoring the remark.

"Well, if I, who have nothing to do, get through life very comfortably, you ought to get along pretty well.

It's like hearing a man with a million a year complain he can't make ends meet, whilst my own humble three thousand afford a surplus. But I really can't stand this awful mess ; I'm going to arrange your books for you."

He took off his coat and set to work methodically.

"There's scarcely an attempt at classification," he remarked. "Suppose I clear these three shelves and start by putting all the history together."

He cleared the space carefully, depositing the books on the floor in neat columns. Hubert sat eyeing the process with almost immediate interest. When Preston next began picking out the far-scattered volumes of history, and arranging them beautifully, the gloom on Hubert's face lightened, and, in spite of his languor, he soon found himself giving an occasional instruction. In about an hour—which seemed to Hubert to fly—some two hundred volumes had been neatly placed. Preston then proceeded to clear more shelves and to get together all works on political economy. Hubert, who had sat bolt upright long ago, and whose occasional remark had passed into a constant fusillade of suggestions, was at last fascinated into action. Off went his coat, too, his face shone eagerly, and soon he was working shoulder to shoulder with Preston, the two whistling in chorus ; his own note now soaring mellow and sonorous.

The time sped, and suddenly Preston, on whose face a sly smile had appeared at intervals, announced it was midnight, and suggested it would do Hubert good to stroll with him in the direction of Jermyn-street.

Much cheered up by these agreeable labours, and without a suspicion that Preston had deliberately lured him out of his lethargy, Hubert willingly fell in with the suggestion.

"I'll come in again in a day or two to help you finish off the job. And you really oughtn't to let them get into such a state again. We're both as black as niggers. Let's wash."

So they adjourned to the next room to get clean again. Hubert explained that, as his principal solace was the bookshops, and fresh piles accumulated every week, he

had to stow them away as best he could. Preston, who by now was rather bored by books, cautiously led the topic away from them, and spoke of their proposed visit to his sister. He was getting restless in London now, he confessed. He had forgotten that, on the day before leaving town, he had changed his Jermyn-street quarters from the first to the fourth floor of the same house, and was rather astonished to-day to find he had to go up so many stairs to get home again. He had made the change, he explained whimsically, to annoy his valet-landlord, who had got the lease of the upper part of four floors pretty cheaply, and sublet them extortionately as chambers, blacking the boots himself. Preston had been paying him three hundred pounds a year for the commonplace rooms on the first floor. The top rooms were less than half that, but then they were further off from this wretched scamp who constantly reeked of alcohol, and it would be punishing him for his greed by making him tramp up so many flights of steps in response to the bell. He frankly rejoiced in the man's woes, and rubbed his hands gleefully at the thought of the many months it would take to relet the first floor at that absurd rent, even though "clubland was round the corner"—as the auctioneers had it—and new batches of gilded youth might be coming up daily for their first taste of London life on a basis of independent bachelorhood.

"You must come and see these new diggings of mine to-morrow—I won't keep you out of your bed to-night. We'll have a house-warming all to ourselves and then go off to dine."

Hubert suddenly remembered he had an engagement for the afternoon, and could not turn up till half-past seven.

"Going to see some actress, I suppose," said Preston rallying.

"Precisely!" said Hubert, much to his friend's astonishment. "Thank you for reminding me. Now I come to think of it, you introduced me to her three years ago."

"I?" exclaimed Preston.

"I don't wonder you've forgotten. You were only introduced to her the moment before. It was at Marvin's studio—on a show Sunday—and you passed her on to me. I don't suppose you've ever seen her since. But perhaps you remember—a fair-haired, bright-faced creature, with shining aspiring eyes, and she had such a cheerful, friendly manner."

"Not in the least. All the same I'm interested. Please proceed."

"You need not look so suspicious. I have scarcely seen her half-a-dozen times in all, and this is the first time I have heard from her since November. All the same I seem to know her very well indeed, though I can't quite make out how."

By some accident Hubert's first conversation with Miss Powers had been "serious," and so the thread of acquaintanceship had been carried forward. Constance Powers was mostly away "on tour" (though she cherished the hope of a London engagement some day), but at long intervals she would write to him to announce her presence in town and ask him to tea at her lodgings. As she figured so little in his thoughts that he practically forgot her existence for weeks at a time, her letter generally came upon him as a surprise. Yet he was always pleased to renew the acquaintance. He felt she had compelled his respect, and he was sure she was a very good creature. Moreover, he sympathized with her in her professional struggles, knowing she worked hard and earned little. After an unusually long silence on her part he had heard from her only the day before, but the interview with his sister-in-law had put her—and most other things—out of his head.

He told Preston what he knew of her. She was one of a large family—there were five sisters and three brothers. The father was a civil servant, of good extraction, and he had inherited the sole relics of past grandeur—the family plate. His substantial emolument was, however, insufficient to keep up his house in South Kensington and dress his daughters becomingly; so that, when the necessary concessions had been made to

appearance, there was scarcely enough left to garnish the silver plate with bread and butter. They had been frightfully pinched, and Constance had at last rebelled and gone on the stage. She had dreamed of helping her sisters by some fabulous success on her part, but her father was so put out that he had never forgiven her. So now, to avoid unpleasantness, she preferred to live in lodgings whenever she came back to London.

"Poor devil!" said Preston.

"Yes, I fancy she has given up her fabulous dreams by now."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of her," corrected Preston. "It was the father that elicited my pity. She must annoy him as much as I annoy my brothers, so I can feel for him."

"As usual we take opposite sides. Our friendship is built up on non-agreement."

"Well," pronounced Preston after a moment's pause; "I suppose I shall have to let you run after the shining, aspiring eyes to-morrow. My own are less attractive and so must wait till half-past seven."

The appointment was definitely arranged.

"And now I want you to give me some money," suggested Hubert just as they were about to go out. "I have another case on hand."

"Oh, all right," said Preston cheerfully. He took out his purse and emptied it on to the table. "There are a couple of guineas at least, only you pay for refreshments if we happen to get hungry."

Hubert counted the money methodically. "Three pounds one and ninepence halfpenny," he announced. "With the five guineas promised me by Lady Wycliffe, I shall have more than the twenty pounds needed."

"Another case of shining, aspiring eyes, and, I suppose, another *tête-à-tête* soon."

"I have promised to call for her cheque the day after to-morrow."

"Though you disapprove of aristocracy, you make the best possible use of it," laughed Preston. "After the pitched battle between you, she wanted me to bring you to St. James's Square, but I told her I wasn't going to

take the responsibility of presenting you to hereditary nobility. So, being strong-minded, she wrote to you herself."

Preston went on to ask if he had seen her during his absence. Hubert had not repeated his first visit, though he had taken Lady Wycliffe at her word that he might use her purse occasionally for his charities. He had found her, he said, a charming and gentle-mannered old lady who frankly regretted she had had the temerity to enter the lists against him, not because she hadn't a good case, but that she was not its worthy exponent. As to her reputation for being intellectual, her conversation certainly showed a wide range of reflection; but she was swayed too much by sentiment and personal preference to be able to think coolly, though her pleasant humility struck him as not insincere. Hubert added that she had made him suspect she did not at heart believe in the reality of his democracy, despite the almost passionate vigour of his reply to her sentimental defence of caste in *The Red Review*.

"That is probably the truth," said Preston. "She was delighted when she found I knew you, for, in spite of all your hard blows, she felt you were a gentleman, she said. And she simply cannot understand any one she likes holding ideas that are 'not nice.' Not that she minds your putting forward theories that are not to her taste; but, if she likes you, she doesn't like to feel that they represent convictions, that they are rooted in the blood. She is, in fact, a woman with whom you may talk intimately every day for a whole year, complimenting yourself on her sympathetic comprehension; yet, at the end of that time, you will discover, to your surprise, that, to build up her conception of you, she has only chosen such aspects of you as pleased her. She will not have heard a word, apparently, of your most cherished convictions—no matter how you may have insisted on them—unless she fancies they suit you. Try as you may to undeceive her, she will go her own way and believe about you only what she finds it agreeable to believe. I'm afraid she's a hopeless sentimentalist, though wonderfully kind-

hearted. She will live up to her shining, aspiring eyes to the end of the chapter."

"Nevertheless one can't help respecting her," said Hubert, "if only for her sincerity of intention."

"I respect her for other reasons, too," said Preston. "She is one of the very few people who have a great admiration for Robert Preston. There must be more in her than I myself think. I first swam into her favour by explaining, apropos of flirtation, that the word 'coquet' etymologically meant 'to strut about like a cock on a dunghill.' That seemed to please her. I may warn you that, though she's a grandmother now, she sometimes gives herself quite flirtatious airs."

"I think I shall like her tremendously all the same," said Hubert. "And I dare say she has a real intuitive appreciation of you. Nobody could of course *understand* you."

"I am not a very great mystery. I am merely a wise person, who, regularly, as bedtime approaches, feels himself full of splendid energy, and begins to doubt whether there may not be something in ambition after all."

"And what happens in the morning?" asked Hubert.

"Splendid energy only comes on at bedtime, happily. In the morning I meditate affectionately on my fortune, and repeat to myself the allegory of the three men, who, like myself, perceived the world to be pure folly. The first became a hermit and botanized; the second, laughing in his heart, put on a grave face and a long beard, watched the seething, foolish spectacle, and adroitly extracted millions from its madness—with branch offices in every capital; whilst the third, poor fellow, committed suicide. All three made donkeys of themselves, but then they hadn't three thousand a year to begin with—like me! And now, old man, I think I've dragged you far enough. Please lend me a shilling for a cab-fare."

V

THOUGH such a long interval had elapsed since he had last heard from Miss Powers, Hubert, whenever he had chanced to think of her, had nevertheless felt sure she would turn up again. In a universe of unpredictable contingencies here was at least one certainty. "Won't you come for your annual cup of tea?" was the present humourous reminder of her existence, written from an address somewhere in Pimlico.

He found her in a ground-floor sitting-room, which contrived to look furnished, yet did not violently suggest "lodgings." There were basket-chairs and quiet cretonne curtains; but the walls held neither paper fans nor gaudy plates nor horrible pictures, while neat matting took the place of the usual dingy carpet. He noticed at once that Miss Powers had strangely altered. She looked certainly older, what with the suspicion of lines at the corners of her mouth, but that was not the chief thing. There was, in fact, something about her that puzzled him. In one light she seemed repressed and sobered, and her large eyes shone with a sort of gentle pathos as if beseeching kindness. And yet an unmistakable contentment radiated from her, quiet and deep and strong. Her greeting was, as usual, enthusiastic.

"I know what you are thinking," she exclaimed, as, at her bidding, he took his seat on a chintz-covered sofa; "that I'm looking so much more angelic than ever before."

"True," he laughed. "All your bitterness must have got transmuted, in the crucible of your nature, into pure sweetness."

"All my bitterness! Oh, yes, I remember. What

a born grumbler you must think me! I'm disgusted with myself, always reserving my lamentations for you."

"Oh, no," he protested; "I take that as a compliment."

"I hope you're not expecting more of that kind of compliment."

"No, indeed," he assured her. "I do not take so pessimistic a view of your existence."

"Thank you," she said gravely, as she set a small kettle over a spirit-lamp. There was a touch of mystic softness in her voice, an undertone of self-caress, which Hubert had heard in the voices of happy women.

"I am in hopes, indeed, that you have been having much more agreeable times of late," he continued.

"Perfectly delightful times!" she assured him; "but why do you look so astonished?"

"You seem so *extraordinarily* contented with existence."

"Existence is worth it!" she flaunted.

He had in the past been wont to indulge before her in a little playful cynicism, to which she, on her part, had always listened with sad approval. But to-day her attitude seemed to have reversed itself entirely. Half to tease her, half to discover what good fortune was hers, he set about regaling her with one or two mournful generalizations.

"Your liver's out of order, and I'm not going to argue with you," she returned calmly.

She continued to stand over her kettle, dividing her attentions between that and the conversation. And persistently she refused to take him seriously, till at last, unable to check him otherwise, she caught up a ball of twine that lay near at hand and threw it at him. He caught it neatly, and it seemed to bring illumination.

"Who has been falling in love with you?" he asked.

She laughed and reddened. "How clever of you to guess! And now I suppose you'd like to hear all about it."

They looked at each other and both laughed.

"Certainly—if you care to tell me," he said.

From his previous talks with her he knew she was

on good terms with ever so many men, all more or less connected with her own profession. Hubert bunched them all together—they formed rather a phantasmal crowd in his mind; though, when one of them had once appeared unexpectedly, he proved to be substantial enough—a stout, cleanshaven, somewhat Napoleonic person, whom Miss Powers introduced as Mr. Richard Plantagenet. He wore “locks” instead of hair, possessed a smooth, vigorous tongue and anti-democratic opinions, and suggested lessons in elocution, recitations at evening parties, and, somewhere in the universe, a wife living separated from him.

“Of course I want to tell you,” she exclaimed. “You are such a lovely Father Confessor. That’s why I liked you at first sight.”

“So that’s the *rôle* I’ve been playing!”

“Oh, you’re a dear old Father, you never lecture severely. . . . I’m flattering you, because otherwise one couldn’t be sure of your clemency. You’re not sufficiently susceptible to pretty women.”

She threw out the last words with conviction, as if she had been secretly annoyed all along at his never having fallen in love with her, and as if, even in her happiness, she could not forgive him for having failed to pay her this supreme compliment.

“The pretty women have scarcely shown themselves susceptible to me.”

“How stupid of them!” She could be bolder now that she could not be suspected of setting her cap at him. “But let us get on to the confession.”

His name was William, she explained, and he was a young actor into whose society she had been thrown on the tour that had just ended. He was really a clever fellow, much too good for the Provinces, as his acting had shown the other men up as a set of amateurs. Moreover, he was a gentleman through and through—in his every thought and feeling, in his preferences and repugnances, in what he tolerated and what he disdained. His face was the face of a god, she declared; his eyes were sweet and full of mystery. Such a wonderful boy

had at once fascinated her, and it was quite incomprehensible that he should ever have thought of caring for her—and caring with all his heart and soul and might!

She paused to brood greedily over this miraculous fact. Just then the kettle boiled noisily.

She laughed with a child's eager gaiety. "I was almost forgetting about that." She bustled about on the tips of her toes, humming softly to herself. Soon she had scalded the leaves.

"Your tea is most excellent," pronounced Hubert presently. "William is really a lucky fellow."

"I can cook as well," she proclaimed proudly. "And I'm a careful housekeeper. On tour one learns the value of every penny."

"It is not generally suspected that touring affords so domestic a training."

"That depends upon the individual," she explained, overlooking his smile. "If one has the gift of domesticity one can manage to exercise it."

"This, I presume, is a preliminary experiment in house-keeping?" he inquired, indicating the room generally.

"Not exactly an experiment." Her face saddened a little. "It is more of a speculation. . . . Of course you don't understand. Well, I made a great fool of myself soon after I last saw you. In short, I threw up a rather nice engagement to take out a company of my own."

He raised his eyebrows. "As a capitalist?"

"I hadn't five pounds of my own, but a girl who had a hundred put the idea into my head and persuaded me to borrow her money. She was anxious to get into the profession, and she was to share the profits. I ended by booking a tour, giving her a part, and losing all the money. . . . And then there were debts! . . . My heart was crushed. I nearly went mad with worry. I have been paying instalments ever since, and, of course, I mean to pay every penny. But the girl was horrid! Luckily I got work, though only after a terrible interval. Her abusive letters kept following me all over the country."

"The homage of William was a consolation, no doubt!"

"Those letters hurt me more than I can tell you. But I wouldn't breathe a word to William about all these troubles. You may think that was wrong of me, but I felt it would be a crime to sadden him—he is always so cheerful and happy. However, to explain my speculation. I lived in this very house immediately after the breakdown. I starved in fact for several weeks in a back-room upstairs."

"You horrify me!" exclaimed Hubert.

"I had to pawn everything to pay the rent, and I don't think I spent sixpence a day on food. Worse than all, that horrible girl kept calling and making my life miserable. She could see quite well that I wasn't able to get a proper meal, whereas she had a comfortable home."

"Why not have gone back to your family?"

"And confessed myself beaten! I would rather have died!"

"Why did you not think of writing to me?" he asked meaningly.

Tears came into her eyes. "But I was already in debt quite enough," she cried; "and I would have taken poison sooner than borrow another penny."

"How you must have suffered!"

"How awful of me always to be harrowing your feelings! But, as I told you just now, my luck changed. I got a fairly good part and——"

"You got William."

"I got William," she repeated, smiling. "And when I came back to London last week I went in for this domestic speculation. Four rooms were to be had here a bargain. With a little thought and a very small outlay I managed to make them quite presentable. Already I have let the floor up-stairs to a married couple, friends of mine, and I have another tenant for this floor ready to come in as soon as I am off again. Willie and I are trying to keep together this coming tour, and I hope to clear my debts from the profits of the speculation."

"So all promises to end like a fairy tale."

"I am happy," she murmured dreamily.

"It's really quite refreshing to find the course of true love run smooth," he observed.

"The course of true love never runs smooth," she declared with amusing sudden lugubriousness.

"What! more troubles!" He could not help laughing aloud, and she joined in with him.

"First there's Willie's family," she explained; "and then there's my family. When my mother first heard of the engagement she exclaimed: 'What! my daughter marry an actor!' and when Willie's mother was informed of the same event she called out: 'What! my son marry an actress!' Willie's father is a solid West India merchant, and has a solid Philistine stronghold in North Kensington. Though Willie went on the stage against his people's wishes, he still lives at home when in London. He does it to please his mother, who hopes to influence him against all things theatrical, including myself. Their feeling against me is very strong, in fact; but, as Willie was always a bit of a darling, they do not display it in any noisy fashion. All the same they try to make him understand its reality. If he marries me, he will not be helped 'to support me,' as they say. I went there to tea last Sunday (he insisted on their asking me) and they were just frigidly pleasant to me. They believe in their hearts that his 'fancy' for me, as they call it, will soon pass—with the help of a little judicious manag-ing on their part. But, of course, Willie will never give me up—never, never!"

Constance went on to speak of their plans. They would probably be marrying about the end of the year, by which time she expected to be clear of debt. She referred to the modest future before them with quiet enthusiasm. Neither Willie nor she cared about any other aspect of the case than the purest and truest. They had found each other helpful single, and they believed they would find each other still more helpful if they joined their lives together. Willie *preferred* not to be receiving anything from his family—they were

both satisfied to face the world hand-in-hand, and work together. They would need very little ; for would not their real happiness depend on what he was to her and she to him ? Of their material prospects she was thus taking a strictly common-sense view. Now that she was twenty-six, she had more sense than when she had left home some seven years ago. Then she was conceited, had thought her talents could achieve anything. But that had long since been knocked out of her. Her own demands on the world had been steadily reduced. If ever she got her lucky chance and did make some money, she would, of course, be glad—if only for the sake of her sisters, who were boring themselves to death.

"I wish you happiness with all my heart !" exclaimed Hubert at parting. "You are a brave girl, and life ought to be kind to you."

Her eyes glistened tearfully. "One cannot be happy till one has learned how, and for that one must suffer. So I do not regret my experiences. It has done me good to tell you everything, and I know you did not mind listening. Of course you forgive me for throwing that at you," she added smilingly, as she caught sight just then of the ball of twine.

"Provided you ask me to the wedding," he stipulated.

VI

HUBERT appreciated his evening at Preston's rooms even more than usual. Despite the few things in the universe about which they were in agreement, he was always touched by his friend's affection, and unfailingly entertained by his whimsical dartings-about between convoluted philosophy (when he was head-splitting) and bare-faced scandal (when he became side-splitting). Hubert felt, in fact, that Preston was a boundless resource; and, if life would not go as one wanted, here, at least, was a pleasant alleviation by the way. To look forward to the quiet weeks in Flintshire raised his spirits immensely.

The stimulation of Preston's companionship lasted well over the next day, and Hubert was perfectly cheerful when, at St. James's Square, he was ushered through a perspective of drawing-rooms, past a veritable museum of art treasures, to a charming habitable nest at the very end. Lady Wycliffe was quite alone, as she had promised him in her letter, and he could not doubt that the pleasure she expressed at seeing him again was entirely sincere. She was wonderfully fresh despite her fifty-six years, but her hair was altogether white, crowning the high forehead with a stately ridge. Her features were firm and clear, with a style and character of their own, and her rather deep-set eyes shone out with a bewitching suggestion of her far-off youth. Her voice, too, was soft and charming, and she spoke on serious topics in so winsome a manner that it was no wonder Hubert (though not without amusement) had felt himself at a disadvantage at their first encounter in person. It was all very well her considerably insisting he must put chivalrous

feeling aside, and meet her only on grounds of pure reason, that the gallantry she appreciated most was to be treated as an intelligent person; but how strike ruthlessly at what was dear to this gentle, sympathetic woman (who had so evidently conceived an immediate liking for him), and calmly make her wince, or watch the pained or horrified expression sweep across her face each moment! This was not at all the same thing as their previous antagonism at a distance in the pages of *The Red Review*, when he could sharpen his quill pen remorselessly, and, even on the proof-sheets, add point to his thrusts. He had smiled inwardly, feeling it was impossible to get her to face cool analysis; though, in her way, she was undoubtedly clever, ready to smile at a jest, and possessing a humour of her own. Happily the conversation had at length moved away from controversy, and soon she had been warmed back from what had been perilously near annoyance into an almost overflowing friendliness.

To-day he found her in a complimentary mood. She liked to feel herself thinking after a conversation, she said, and he had made her think a great deal—most of all about the ideas he had thrown out lightly. "There were things that only made me smile at the time, but afterwards I saw there were really depths. And you were never in the least cross at my seeing only the humour."

"A man often puts laughingly that about which he doesn't laugh at all in his own heart," suggested Hubert, a little shamefaced at this sudden caressing admiration of hers, implied even more by tone than by words. "There is some instinct which urges us to turn everything off with a smile. Perhaps it is only good breeding insisting on a pleasant covering."

Lady Wycliffe considered. "It is true there is some instinct which makes us ashamed of our serious emotions. But is not the real reason that we shrink, even in thought, from the sneers of people we ought to despise, and so grow into accepting their standard?"

"Or is it not rather that we think those emotions too

sacred to be displayed at all," he suggested, not yet perceiving her subtle drift.

"Whatever the cause, we certainly get into a bad habit of restraint—even with those exceptionally appreciative."

He felt now this was a direct shot at him, the more so as he had an almost guilty remembrance that, on the last occasion, he had been guardedly impersonal in his conversation. All the same he preferred to remain so to-day.

"The theatre may be also responsible, at least to some extent," he suggested further. He found himself clutching desperately at the first train of thought that occurred to him. Anything apropos would serve to ward off her threatened too intimate interest in him.

His remark, being so unexpected, made her laugh.

Hubert explained. The human drama, as displayed on the stage, had made people uneasily self-conscious. Emotions and actions in real life beyond a certain strength had come to be considered "theatrical." People became imbued with a horror of any "scene" in real life, and thus real life having receded from stage level, the stage had been left bare of reality. "A few modern playwrights have been pursuing us in their efforts after true presentation, but we keep shrinking away from them. Thus their work, in the attempt to catch us up, has become so subtle and attenuated that plain folk have to go back to melodrama for their amusement."

This fanciful exposition was more in Preston's vein than his own, as he was smilingly aware the whole time.

"How ingenious!" she exclaimed. "But are there any such modern playwrights—subtle and attenuated?"

"If there aren't, there ought to be," he declared. "What right have playwrights not to fit in with my argument?"

"Now you're making fun of me." She pretended to look distressed. "But even that's better than the shameful way you treated me in your reply to my article," she added in half-playful reproach, as if to say, "Do I look as if I deserve it?"

"But I'm less afraid of you now," she resumed; "for I don't believe now that you know me you would ever try to prove me a fraud again. How can a clever man like you believe that the aristocracy are all humbugs! It's too awful!"

"But I don't believe that," began Hubert; whereupon, with great joy, she swooped down quickly on that denial, uninterested in any explanation that might modify its apparent absoluteness.

"I am much relieved," she exclaimed. "I confess I made up my mind to draw you out *really*, and I'm so glad now." She clapped her hands with all the fresh glee of a young girl.

She looked quite happy, and Hubert knew, both from his own former experience and from what Preston had told him, that it would be perfectly useless to attempt to make her grasp his real views, already more than adequately presented in the article that had vexed her. He was forced, indeed, to listen to the repetition of a great part of her own article; for, to follow up her advantage, she descanted at full length on what the aristocracy meant to the country, on its high standard of honour and bravery, on its unflinching devotion to duty. She spoke charmingly, with conviction and eloquence, her face afire with seriousness and high purpose. He let the glow burn itself out. "Well," was her challenge, as, breathless, she came to a halt at last; "what can possibly be said against all that?"

"What I have already said," he was constrained to remind her.

"I spoke from my heart; you only from your brain. Thought is not everything. We are human beings first and thinkers after. I want to know you as a human being, not merely as a mind. I am sure a man like you must be unhappy, if only because you think too much and give too little heed to your heart."

She evidently meant to persist in "drawing him out" in spite of his constant evasion. His ever-watchful instinct of reserve was inclined for a moment to assert itself in even stronger opposition. He must make her

perceive that this ground was distasteful to him. She saw some change in his face.

"Forgive me," she murmured. "Perhaps I was too impulsive, but I did not mean to be imprudent or inquisitive."

He was touched by her concern, and annoyed at having to fence with her to keep her from coming to too close quarters. She was truly an admirable woman, he told himself, full of refined sensibilities. If she had sought to strike the intimate note, her desire had been only to strengthen their friendliness.

He disclaimed any dissatisfaction with her. "I was thinking how far your surmise was from the truth. Indeed it is!"

"I repeat my impulsiveness came from my heart. Grant that my surmise was wrong—though you must forgive me if I still believe you don't appreciate the point sufficiently. For instance, you never seem to speak of yourself. I want to know you better—really to know you. Explain yourself!" she commanded laughingly.

With such a direct attack poor Hubert began to find the defence difficult.

"There is very little to explain. I don't know I am precisely the unhappy person you surmise me to be; if I am, I accept the fact as good-humouredly as possible. You see I lead a studious life in my leisure, and I think that as good a way of getting through one's days as any other."

"Getting through one's days! What a hideous phrase! One ought not to feel one's life in that way. It shows there is something wrong. You live alone in those dreadful chambers in the Temple. How desolate! The thought makes me shudder." She spoke with real maternal solicitude.

"The Temple's not such a bad place," he protested.

"It's a bad place for *you*," she retorted. "A man like you ought to have married. I may talk to you like this—I am an old woman. No gallantry, please,—I repeat I am an old woman, and you are a man to whom one may talk. Either something has happened in your life

to sadden you—of course you take it good-naturedly—or you are wilfully spoiling your existence. In either case you ought to reconsider matters. You are in the prime of life—you ought certainly to marry at once, to have children. There! I've said it all, and now I am breathlessly awaiting your anger at my presumption."

He smiled reassuringly, so far won over as to be debating within himself whether it was possible to reveal the unhappy circumstances with which he had to wrestle. He was tempted, but he resisted. To what good drag up the story of those dead times, of his brother's marriage, of his own struggles, of his estrangement from his mother! The impulse to pour himself out died away, and he again found himself evading her with generalities.

"You recommend marriage so warmly, because the idea of marriage is full of charm to the onlooker. It is, in fact, hard to avoid conceiving it save with all its æsthetic and romantic associations; and, for the moment, we are deceived into imagining the beauty and romance which is in our own conception to be really in the actual fact. The colour of history is a good example of such a purely æsthetic synthesis, for it exists only for the eye of the on-looker. In the same way a cathedral choir may be divine as felt by a reverent listener; the boys within it may be bickering over surreptitious stick-jaw, or speculating about the coming fisticuffs between two of them. A humourist often gets his opportunities by digging into the internal reality of some of our fine cherished syntheses. He takes us by surprise, and we laugh. Thus it is with marriage. The reality takes us by surprise—and we weep!"

"Ah, I see what it is!" she exclaimed, shaking a coquettish finger at him; "Your friend leads you astray; he has certainly a bad influence over you. Believe me, marriage may be as beautiful a fact as it is an idea, and you are a man who can make it so—you who are able to choose wisely."

Tempted to play with the subject, Hubert asked what kind of a woman she would consider a wise choice.

Lady Wycliffe reflected, and then they set themselves

to elaborate the point together, she in terrible earnest, he secretly amused. A marvellous creature was evolved as the result of their concerted efforts, a combination of beauty, charm, goodness, honour, intellect, and refinement; whereupon Hubert was able to prove with ease that to secure such a wife was for him a wholly impracticable matter. It depended on luck rather than on searching and endeavour. For the latter process life was too short; so that if one wished to avoid a marriage of convenience—as he did—there was nothing else, in actual life, than a haphazard romance, due to the accident of proximity or meeting. This absolutely exhausted the alternatives, and the requisite accident had not yet happened to him. By good fortune the requisite accident might likewise prove to be the lucky accident, and he might marry just the ideal person; but in any case there was distinctly a lottery. He could only wait for marriage to happen; it was useless for him to move with the deliberate idea of attaining that end. And this was considering the question purely in its own aspects, whereas in life there were endless possible accompanying circumstances which might spoil even the most favourable case. Nothing existed apart, but everything was rooted in the world in some definite way; and, given the most suitable couple and the deepest mutual attachment, there might still be no marriage. As Hubert had the theme at his fingers' ends, he took a wicked pleasure in enlarging on it for all it was worth, and indulging in every plausible exaggeration. Lady Wycliffe's face grew sadder and sadder. She held up her hands at last.

"Enough!" she cried. "You have absolutely convinced me of the impossibility of marriage. Still I am illogical enough to wish that the requisite accident and the lucky accident had happened to you ten years ago. . . . I should have loved your children," she added softly.

He was conquered for the moment. "You are good," he replied with some emotion, "but the world is the world. Ten years ago marriage was the one social purpose for which I was not eligible."

Lady Wycliffe's face lighted up with indignation. "But surely no woman worthy of the name would refuse a man simply because she might have to forgo luxury."

"One must submit to the facts as one finds them," he said.

"It is perfectly horrible how life is bound up at every point with money," she exclaimed. "When one is rich one is in danger of forgetting that—the money machinery is made to do its work so quietly. I saw the last of my daughters married years ago—all three married wealthy men, but there was no thought about the money on either side."

"You will understand then how a bachelor like myself—who has to work—gives up the idea of marriage altogether."

"I hope you are not embittered; but of course not—you take everything good-humouredly," she added, smiling.

He was quick to seize the chance of turning the conversation into a lighter key. "If I could go to sleep for awhile—after the manner of Adam—and wake up ready married, well, I should take that with equal good-humour; provided the original rib was still there, of course. Getting married means a frightful amount of energy, and one shrinks from the idea through sheer laziness."

"Ah, so that's the real truth! You take a load off my mind. You bachelors are lazy, and therefore invent all sorts of ingenious reasons to prove marriage impossible!"

They both laughed, and the conversation somehow passed on to less personal ground. Lady Wycliffe was evidently enjoying herself immensely. She was interested in all sorts of speculations that did not involve her social and political bias, and, once on neutral ground, she displayed a keen and ready understanding.

Nor, indeed, did she forget the pretext on which she had invited him to call to-day. She had the cheque ready in an envelope, and her passing it to him naturally

led them, apropos of his beneficiaries, to discuss the personal factor in success and failure.

At that moment her husband happened to come wandering along into the room absent-mindedly. Hubert had been pointing out that the mere march of life created forces overwhelmingly larger than the efforts of any individual, though there were plenty of individuals who were fortunate enough to have these forces co-operate with them. Such people were (if not unduly conceited) naturally much impressed by Providence, whereas those who were overborne through no fault of their own were inclined to disbelieve in Providence altogether. In either case the basis of conviction was equally coarse.

Lord Wycliffe was a sturdy, white-bearded figure of sixty-eight, with shining, hearty features, bluffly cordial, with laughter lurking always in his throat. He had obviously never known a moment's melancholy in his life. He had advanced well into the room before he was aware his wife was entertaining a visitor, and he caught only Hubert's last sentence. He smiled a little uncomfortably. "Janet has got in a devilish clever-looking chap to ta'k metaphysics to her. I'd better get out of this boat as soon as possible," was his thought.

However, he recognized Hubert's name as soon as it was mentioned, apologized for his intrusion on their conversation, and chatted for a moment with charming amiability. Then he stood about uneasily, coughed once or twice, and was thankful when his wife gave him a cup of tea, which, however, he took with a show of hesitation, alleging he was just on the point of hastening to a club appointment. His acceptance of the tea inspired him to remark that the beverage was always refreshing in such close weather. Hadn't Mr. Ruthven found it stuffy in the courts? He talked pleasantly for an instant about the wonderful old judge before whom Hubert had argued that day, and who had been a great friend of his father's. Then with a breezy "You won't think me rude," he shook hands and took his leave.

"You will like my husband," declared Lady Wycliffe. "He is so fond of clever men, and I want you both to be

much better acquainted." She hesitated a moment as if fearing she might be about to challenge a rebuff, then asked him to come and dine on the Thursday in the following week. Under the impression she wished to accord him a quiet opportunity of cultivating Lord Wycliffe, and knowing that his acceptance would give her pleasure, he readily expressed his willingness.

He was rewarded by the way her face lighted up, then presently was puzzled by some quick succession of thoughts which he saw suggested in her expression, and which, he was sure, concerned himself. However, when she spoke again, she merely went back to the point they had been at when her husband had interrupted them, and it was only at the end when Hubert had risen that she reverted to the intimate note.

"I feel so sorry that your life is not happier," she said, holding his hand affectionately and wistfully. "You must really rid yourself of your laziness," she added more lightly; "and you will soon find somebody who is worthy of you. Why, if I were a young girl, I should marry you myself."

She stepped over to the bell briskly and touched it. "I am so glad you don't think me a fraud after all," she called to him laughingly as he smiled his adieu.

VII

HIS visit to Lady Wycliffe left in Hubert's mind a sense as of another contest waged between them (though of a very different sort from their previous encounter in *The Red Review*). Yet those instants of their conversation which he had striven most to evade had made on him the deepest impress. He was touched by the feeling she had displayed, the more so as he was sure that she had had no suspicion he was trying to keep her at arm's length. Her very unconsciousness of the bout had carried her almost to conquering-point. Time and again she had listened to his desperate divagations with patient interest, only to return with surprising naturalness to the insistent pursuit of her own theme.

When he came to look back, what rang most in his ears was her note of earnest intention, vibrating now with meanings, which he, intent on his half-hearted parrying of her eager advances, had failed then to catch. But in his after-reflection his perception seemed to quicken; and ultimately, recalling the whole unrelenting drift of her argument, and remembering, moreover, those significant flashes across her face at that moment of swift consideration after he had accepted her invitation, he could not help suspecting that she must have conceived the idea of finding a wife for him—in so nice a way, of course, that he should never suppose she had planned it. No doubt, indeed, she had some particular person in mind for him, and he amused himself trying to imagine what this person was like. Possibly after all—and this seemed to explain that sudden illumination of her features—she would be having other

guests on the evening she had named, and this very *parti* was to be included among them.

"Poor Lady Wycliffe—just like her charming, sentimental self!" he could not help smiling, for he seemed to know her very well now. How impracticable of her to suppose that she could promote a marriage between people in two different worlds!—the different dispositions of existence this mere fact involved would alone create insuperable difficulties. The London season was running to a close, and he was not likely, what with the weeks in Flintshire and his immediate return after that to his duties, to see anything of Lady Wycliffe again for many months to come; for the Wycliffes were wont to spend an unusually great part of the year at their Yorkshire seat.

Her scheme could thus scarcely survive its inception; but the circumstances were just such as it would be characteristic of Lady Wycliffe to overlook—with her inveterate habit of seeing things, as in a romance, divorced from actual conditions. So altogether Hubert did not exercise himself too seriously about this threat to his bachelorhood.

Not unnaturally the theme led his thoughts back to his mother. He had been keeping himself informed of her health and even of her local activities, though she would not now permit any direct communication between them. He knew she had quite enough to live upon, and he even assumed she must be saving a little, for there had been no outside call upon her for years. She had always had ambitious ideas about her sons' marriages, and, since she had been so grievously stricken in the case of the younger one, Hubert was sure his own marriage into a "good family" (which at the same time should be wealthy, for the old Mrs. Ruthven did not despise a solid fortune, nor even a modest one so long as it *was* a fortune) would, in spite of the estrangement, yield her intense pleasure. True, her bliss would not be perfect unless the wife were of her own choosing, but, with regard to that point, he might count on her generous forbearance.

She had been a good, though stern mother to her boys, and, if Hubert's love had survived undiminished his more recent experiences of the imperious woman, deep-eyed, furrowed, and silver-haired, who had well-nigh reduced him to despair, it was because he cherished the memory of what she had been in the distant past. Her grievances against him had been endless, the last time he had attempted to come to an understanding with her. His continued writings had scandalized the neighbourhood, and she had been ashamed to show her face anywhere for months. Moreover, Edward was dug up from his grave to be murdered over again; whilst Agnes and the children were torn limb from limb for their bare-faced subsistence on the family revenues. Hubert perceived that nothing short of converting him into a puppet would satisfy her. Taking her autocratic stand on the unanswerable fact of her maternity, she would not have allowed him an idea or a desire of his own. She would have prescribed his convictions, dictated his actions, ordered his meals and his recreations, selected his house, his wife, his friends, planned his honeymoon and his holidays, controlled his expenditure, and even allotted him pocket-money shilling by shilling. On his unwillingness to have so much unpleasant discussion forced upon him, she had indulged in a great outbreak of sobbing. She did not suppose she would last much longer now. She was an old woman and God knew she had done her duty. Now she was deserted by her only child—poor forlorn creature that she was! Soon it would be too late and then he would think more gently of his mother. "Oh my God!" she had cried hysterically, with a swaying of her body: "Why did you not take away my life before my poor Edward was stolen from me! Oh, that I should have lived to see my first-born turn against me!"

Such was the painful scene with which that futile interview had ended. The bitterness with which he had journeyed back to London had never wholly left him—his mother's iron had entered too deeply into his soul. Even to-day the mere memory of that stormy afternoon

was able to give him an extremely unpleasant sensation, causing him to shrink back into himself and desire to have done with everybody and everything.

However, this dejection was only of momentary duration, and he brightened again with the thought of the coming vacation. Nor did he forget that school would now be breaking up, and that it would be nice for the children to have a real holiday too. They had never yet in their lives been to the seaside, and the very suggestion of such a trip would open out paradise to them.

His ordinary visit to Agnes was not due for another week or so, but, on the day he was to dine at St. James's Square, he was impelled to go at once and arrange their departure. Even Agnes would find it difficult to discover some insidious motive behind his desire to give her and the children, say, six weeks at Margate or some such other place.

For once, however, he was destined to come upon her in an unprecedentedly affable humour. She had a festive, well-dressed appearance, as if she had just returned from Sunday morning church, and she distinctly beamed on him in welcome. Nor did she seem in the least depressed by the notion of the holiday.

"Girls!" she cried joyously, summoning them from the adjoining room. "We're going to the sea-side for six weeks!"

They came scampering in eagerly, and their mother did not frown as Hubert caressed them.

School had already broken up, she explained to him, and, on the previous afternoon, she had taken the girls in their best frocks down to Hyde Park. Her mind was chock-full of the excursion, and evidently the radiance of her enjoyment had brightened the whole of this following day. The household was still sporting its best attire, as if to live up to some new brilliant standard. Agnes's face shone as she recalled the glorious vision of Park Lane and the Row on which she had feasted so greedily, and which she was now digesting with not less pleasure. She described it all in a

breathless swirl of words—the beautiful houses, the immense crowds of people, the lords and ladies driving in elegant carriages, the prancing horses, the dashing riders, the haughty young ladies with their grooms! Occasionally she dashed in a little criticism, even mockery, as at one old frumpy-looking lady who had dyed her hair brown when you could see it was grey at the roots. “And as for her dress, why everybody was laughing at her. Such a fright I never saw in all my born days. I flatter myself I should cut as good a figure in a carriage as some of *them* any day.”

She appealed to the girls for corroboration, and they, imbued with their mother’s scorn, laughed at the remembrance.

“And did you enjoy it all, little girls?” asked Hubert.

“Rather!” said May. “I should like to go every day.”

“Mother says,” put in Gwenny, “that the people in the carriages and on the horses go out every afternoon and enjoy themselves. They never have any work to do.”

“Perhaps they are not enjoying themselves so much as they appear to be,” suggested Hubert.

“Oh, uncle, I’m quite sure they were enjoying themselves,” said May confidently. “I should, if I had a carriage of my own.”

“Don’t be so foolish, May,” said Gwenny. “Only rich people have carriages.”

“My little May is going to grow up one day and marry a rich young handsome lord,” interposed their mother. “And my Gwenny, too, of course.”

Yesterday’s gay sights had evidently unsettled her ideas, for this was soaring high with a vengeance. Hubert, however, did not disturb her mood, for he would not at present revert to the subject of their last discussion, and there were only agreeable matters to talk over this time. To complete the joyous excitement of the family, he now proceeded to open certain little packages which he had put down on entering, and

over which he had placed his tall silk hat, so that they had seemed quite unrelated to his visit. Boxes of sweetmeats and story-books for the children, and a gold brooch for their mother, were revealed in turn amid expressions of surprised delight; and even the production of an envelope containing a cheque for a much larger amount than usual did not evoke in Agnes the usual antagonism. He always gave her a cheque, because she liked the excitement of the journey to the West-end bank on which it was drawn and the important feeling of going about high business.

When he expressed his anxiety that they should leave London at once, Agnes smiled indulgently. Just like a man! How were they to go off without preparations? There were endless little things to be bought, and there were frocks to be made, and everything had to be packed. However, she would do her best and try hard for Saturday morning. He explained he himself had accepted an invitation to pass his vacation with friends, but he would probably be able to pay them a day's visit at Margate before he went off to Wales, and there was the possibility of perhaps a longer visit from him near the end of their stay.

The children's faces were uplifted in ecstasy.

"Yes, uncle, do come," they chimed together.

Hubert went away in a lighter mood, pleased that the children were happy and that he had been able to create for them so entrancing a prospect.

VIII

THE gratification, in fact, he had afforded the little family was sufficient compensation for his having to hurry unduly in order to arrive at St. James's Square with the barest punctuality.

It was not a formal party as, on learning that Preston had been asked for the same evening, he had begun to think it might be ; but still he found some dozen guests assembled in the drawing-room. The bluff, happy-looking host was talking with a tall, thin iron-grey man, who held his hands behind him, was most severe of mien, and, as a listener, almost comically attentive. This was a neighbour of the Wycliffes, Sir Robert Hardyng by name, to whose daughter, Miss Cissie Hardyng, Hubert was presently introduced as well. She was a fresh, pretty girl, of markedly Saxon type, with a nice voice and a subdued manner, but, at the moment, his impression of her was of the vaguest. That was because the big-chested figure in the prime of life, who was just then discoursing to her on torpedoes, flashed at him a keen, proud glance. "Who the devil are you?" it seemed to demand at the very least. Hubert could not flash back a similar challenge; he knew very well that Lord William Hannerley was the hero of a far-famed naval exploit a few years back. *Per contra*, a gnarled, stern-looking earl who had with him a young son fresh from Eton was as markedly gracious to him as the hostess herself. The boy who had hooked himself on to Preston as looking the nearest to his sort seemed to be extremely pleased at the progress he was making.

Very soon Hubert was eating his soup with Miss

Hardynge on his right, and an old, stately, though somewhat powdered woman (who had arrived even later than he, and whom he afterwards discovered was Lord William's mother) on his left. As he had no reason for assuming that his hostess's desire to see him married had already died away, he glanced round the table with some curiosity. Upstairs he had somehow taken notice of the men more than of the women; perhaps because a vague group of the latter, whose names he had scarcely caught, offered to his eye few outward points of distinction. Now, so far as he could make out, Miss Hardynge was the only unmarried person of her sex in the room; unless, indeed, he were to count the aged yet brisk-looking maiden lady of the Early Victorian school—her first governess, Lady Wycliffe had smilingly whispered him—who, in her prime, had travelled over the beaten tracks of Europe, and subsequently published (through the eminent house of John Murray, and with a view to the improvement of young gentlewomen's minds) two volumes of her valuable observations and experiences, including a lengthy chapter about landing at Calais and passing through the Custom House. Hubert had often come across odd copies a-mouldering in the "twopenny box." He was at least sure that *she* could not be the person to whom his hostess desired him to pay his addresses; though he smiled as he imagined Preston gravely hinting that Lady Wycliffe was by no means incapable of fancying this the appropriate match for him.

He was not, however, getting along very well even with Miss Hardynge. Indeed, he began to think at length she must be finding him a great bore. But then he had never felt himself capable of entertaining that sort of girl, who blossomed in her healthy tens of thousands over the length and breadth of the land. He was relieved when they stumbled at last on "hockey," for that elicited some gleam of interest from her, and set her enlarging on the merits of the game which she much preferred to lawn-tennis. He gathered more from what she said than from any flash of manner that she was

deeply enthusiastic about it. After that, talk flowed more easily ; though her enjoyments appeared to obsess her mind completely. At the same time he could not help seeing that she was assuming that he was a man of fashion who moved in the same sort of world as herself, for she seemed taken aback at the stream of negatives that met her presumptions that he had assisted at this, that, or the other society function. He thought it time to enlighten her at last.

"I dare say I am a queer sort of person from your point of view," he added smilingly.

"Oh, no," she disclaimed, smiling back at him. "I do not think that at all. But you are more difficult than most men."

For the first time he was conscious of being charmed a little, for there was a sudden touch of animation in her voice, hinting at some individual girlish spirit beneath her typical personality.

"I am sorry you find me difficult—though I don't quite know what manner of shortcoming that is. I hope not anything very dreadful."

"It's not a shortcoming," she assured him. "I mean that most men are easy to see through."

"To see through them!" he exclaimed. "That's just the way to see nothing of them. The point is to see into them."

She laughed. "I tried to read one of your articles the other day, Mr. Ruthven. It was as difficult as you are—I couldn't follow the argument a bit. It was like being in the school-room again and I wanted a governess to explain things."

"I am sorry to have worried you!"

"No, indeed. You are quite innocent. Besides, I never would let anything worry me. When things aren't quite to my liking, I sit down and just laugh at them."

"Then I have already had the honour of being laughed at by you!"

She blushed suddenly as if in confusion. "I took you—I mean the article—much too seriously for that,"

she stammered. Then, after a moment of smiling hesitation, she added: "Lady Wycliffe told me that I should have to talk to you to-day, and she said I had better read something of yours beforehand. In fact she lent me the magazine herself."

She gave a quick, laughing glance in the direction of their hostess, so did not see into what a look this last piece of information had startled him. But he was able to meet her smilingly as she turned her face again towards him, her eyes gleaming with quiet amusement. Evidently she had made the confession from a pure sense of fun. He naturally saw more fun in the situation than she; and more still presently when he learnt that the pages with which his neighbour had tried to wrestle were the least heretical of all his writings.

"It is quite nice now to find myself understanding every word you say," she assured him. "I was fearfully afraid of you at first." She was still frankly enjoying the whole experience.

Though they had made great advance since their somewhat inauspicious beginning, and though he had modified his first impression as to the precise type of girl she was, he was still not observing her very closely, and his notions of her appearance—her dress and her features—were of the vaguest. Meanwhile her talk had quickened into chatter, and soon he had heard a great deal about her Yorkshire home, and more particularly about her own life in the country. Her father was very strict. He hated novels, and was always angry at seeing the latest batch from the circulating library lying about the house, though her mother insisted on having them, and there were the visitors to provide for. If by any chance he happened to find her reading one, "Really, Cissie," he would say: "cannot you find some wiser way of employing your time?" All the same she contrived to get through a goodly number of them.

Hubert found, too, she had formed for herself a distinct philosophy of life. She had made up her mind always to be happy, and she would "never, never, never" allow anything to make her miserable.

"Not even other people's troubles?" he could not resist asking.

"It is foolish to be unhappy about other people's troubles. One doesn't lessen their worry, one only makes more in the world than there was before."

Any controversy this might have led to was prevented by the hostess's rising just then, and the astonished Hubert was left meditating on the Pagan doctrine.

Not for long, however; one must be sociable after dinner. Yet he scarcely achieved what Lady Wycliffe had ostensibly desired him to come for—the further cultivation of her husband. Lord Wycliffe was, indeed, attentive to him, was near him at times with his bluff, hearty laughter, addressing him often and including him in an implied intimacy. But his lordship certainly evaded any opportunity for self-revelation. Of Miss Hardynge's father, Hubert was, however, able to obtain a better knowledge. That gravely-courteous and attentively-listening baronet told him frankly that he hated his views, though he admired his abilities. With the manner of a friendly older man lecturing an indiscreet younger one for the good of the latter's soul, he warmly lauded the staunch old ordering of things. He believed firmly in the worth and dignity of his own worldly position. The world was an excellent place, England was the pick of the world, and Yorkshire was the pick of England. Pessimists were ungrateful to their Creator (for he was an earnest Christian), and reformers were, as a rule, actuated by mere vanity, and understood nothing of that with which they were bent on meddling. Happily Sir Robert, as it came out presently, was as enthusiastic an angler as he was a feudalist; and, once his imagination had travelled off to the banks of meandering streams, he had so many pleasant reminiscences to retail, so many technical points to dogmatize about, that there was no fear of dangerous reversions on his part. And altogether he found Hubert so sympathetic a person that he trusted he would honour him some day with a visit in the North.

IX

HUBERT strolled with Preston the short distance from St. James's Square to Jermyn-street, and, at the moment of adieu, was tempted up the many stairs for a quiet, restful chat, which, however, insidiously prolonged itself, to an accompaniment of cigarettes, till two o'clock in the morning. Preston, though he spoke a little about Miss Hardyng, apparently did not attribute to Lady Wycliffe any design with regard to his friend, and Hubert at one moment vacillated in his own mind as to the accuracy of his previous assumptions. Still, on further reflection, he grew more than ever inclined to believe that, in Lady Wycliffe's opinion, Miss Hardyng offered the prospect of a suitable marriage for him. True, she could scarcely be more than twenty-three or twenty-four, but then in society a difference of a dozen years was scarcely considered.

"You no doubt observed I had the very honourable place on Lady Wycliffe's left," had volunteered Preston; "and she favoured me with a great deal of her conversation. She seemed mostly to be praising up everybody round her board, and it gave me a distinct thrill to be feeding with such a unique saintly collection. Had you known, by the way, that the powdered person who sat on your left is the most devoted mother in the kingdom, you might perhaps have been a little more amiable to her."

"I plead guilty. I can only cling to the hope that my amiability towards the other side was at least not misplaced."

"On the same authority a bundle of beauty and

intellect, sympathy and self-sacrifice !—wrapped together in a sixty-guinea dinner gown !”

When Hubert got back to Pump Court he was confronted again by the motley spectacle of his bookshelves, and vowed for the fifth time at least he must complete the rearrangement which Preston had inaugurated but showed no further disposition to continue.

But the habit of gaiety growing on poor Hubert, he permitted Preston on the evenings immediately following to seduce him from books altogether, and they fled the hours at theatres and club smoking-rooms.

Meantime the figure of Miss Hardyng was perhaps the most shadowy of all in Hubert's remembrance of his fellow-guests that evening. He could recall Miss Hardyng's father, he could recall the gnarled-looking earl with his seventeen-year-old Etonian, the naval hero and his mother—all clearly and vividly almost to their every feature. Yet they seemed very much further from him than this irritatingly vague image of the girl whose parting doctrine was still in his ears. He found himself dwelling on her at all sorts of odd times in an ever-foiled attempt to reconstruct her more solidly in his mind's eye. Her figure would float up for a moment, indistinct and elusive. But he could recall no trait of hers—neither the colour of her eyes or hair, nor the height of her forehead, nor the curve of her cheek, nor the movement of lip, nor the gleam of teeth. He had only the general feeling of her fresh young personality that was in him like the echo of a clear, sweet note.

On the Monday morning he had a line from Agnes to say she was now able to fix the following morning for their departure for the seaside. The thought of the happy pitch the children's excitement must have reached by this time made him smile broadly. He was sorry he could not go to see them before they left, as important work had come in which would occupy all his evening, but he made up his mind to surprise them by meeting them at the station and seeing them off. The train mentioned by Agnes was a very early one, but by

rising an hour or so before his usual time he could say good-bye to them and be home again for breakfast.

He was in good spirits all day, and after dinner he settled down to work right up to midnight. The documents with which he was occupied were of unusual interest, and he became eagerly absorbed in them. Appearances in court were for him the exception rather than the rule, and he was grateful his legal practice had been able to shape itself in a way that harmonized with his scholar's temperament. When he had finished he sat about a little to compose his mind before retiring. His thoughts naturally flew to the children and their holiday. Just then they would be sleeping feverishly, dreaming of the sea they were to behold on the morrow for the first time. No doubt Agnes had amply expatiated to them on the poetry of the golden sands and the mystery of bathing-machines, on the joys of digging and paddling and donkey-rides; perhaps had even entertained them with witty scraps from the dialogues of ventriloquists and minstrels—cherished memories of her honeymoon days. They would be out of bed long before it was necessary, and they would certainly have no appetite for breakfast! He pictured them as he should find them at the end of the week—when, he calculated, he would be able to pay them the promised visit—sun-browned, barefoot, and as familiar with sands and sea-weed as if they had been occupied with such things their whole lives.

And presently he found himself trying to recall Miss Hardyng's features again. And amid this idle pastime he could not help remembering Lady Wycliffe's overflowing estimation of the girl as poured into the ear of Preston. He had formed for himself a sufficient idea of Miss Hardyng to be able to agree with his friend as to the extent of Lady Wycliffe's impulsive exaggeration, but, of course, that did not imply any reflection on the girl whose charm and breeding were unquestionable. He could not imagine her as the intimate companion of his existence, but still——

Hubert found a fascination in letting his tired brain

play with this train of ideas. And yet he played with a pretence at seriousness that would have deceived himself were he not at bottom smiling the whole time.

First of all he considered whether his worldly position (viewed as it might be, for example, by some of his dry-as-dust fellow-lawyers who dined out a great deal, and had a great respect for the established solidities) gave him the right to think of such a marriage, and he came to the conclusion he ought to think highly of his standing. Well, was there anything better before him than to become a part of those established solidities? He was no longer in his youth, and if the exigencies of life had been such as to deny him romance at the proper season, then he must even do without romance. The next few years would soon have gone by in their sly, quick-shuffling fashion, and he would find himself forty years old, and, in all likelihood, a melancholy recluse, permanently embittered. If he were ever going to attach any value to the social anchorage, why not now rather than later?

He had always felt that, if he ever married at all, it could only be for love, but, at his age, one must wake up and face things as they are. He must recognize that he had retained the ideas and fancies of adolescence on the subject of marriage, although he had in reality outgrown them. Surely they ought to be swept away.

Towards forty one must marry sensibly. One knows what real women are—human beings with so much sterling worth and so many shortcomings. Useless either to idealize the first or exaggerate the second.

But he had not the slightest idea whether Miss Hardyng had, since their meeting, given him another thought. She was a unit in a special thickly-populated little world, whose air she breathed, whose faiths she accepted, whose pleasures she enjoyed. She saw from its standpoint, and neither thought, knew, nor cared about humanity in the way he thought, knew, and cared. Everything had been ready-made for her except her dresses. Her interests, her imagination, her very life were all within a carefully-drawn circle—though evi-

dently that had never struck her. And a network of bonds that pleasantly linked her to a thousand other people—all similarly interlinked—determined her thoughts, desires, and activities.

His own life had been lived outside the barriers of her world; his own thoughts, desires, and activities had been determined, in so far as they were for material ends, by the force of circumstances, in so far as they were for noble ends, by the force of his own character. How grotesquely contrasting their respective vision of the world! Was a successful social partnership possible between them?

He believed it was, though his vision could never become hers. And the idea, moreover, was singularly attractive. There was something refreshing and restful about this pretty young person who unquestioningly partook of what the fates had spread before her. Why should he ever disturb the simple serenity of her mind, her large naïve faith in her feudal traditions, why vex her brain, busy only with the concrete points of a Yorkshire seat or a London season? She was bright enough in her limited way, with a sharp eye for things within her own small outlook. As a figure at the head of his household she pleased him immensely, and, in imagination, he already felt proud of her. He might even train her in a plain, broad way to share his philanthropic aspirations; though, of course, he could never surrender to her the fortress of his innermost soul. But he would always be conscious of the restful calm of hers. She would be as fresh, as absolute, and as untroubled as an undying flower.

Of the innumerable yet subtly-guarded doors that led to her world several were now open to him, and, if he so desired, he could pass through at will. Why then not pass through, bent on carrying her off?

The adventure pleased him. When at last he retired, he had almost come to believe in the serious purpose of his long meditation.

X

THAT same Monday May and Gwenny rose as early as if it were already the next day and they were to be off immediately. Everything to-day was to be make-shift, and they instinctively put on their shabbiest frocks—by way of accentuating the brilliant time to follow. Gwenny's attitude was one of acceptance of all the joy to come, and she was content to be thrilled by the general sensation of the occasion; whereas May's brain was busy with thousands of plans and she was eagerly enjoying her joy beforehand. But both had that strange, nice feeling that came whenever they moved to new rooms (Agnes was fond of changing their quarters) before things had been put in order; when impromptu meals had to be eaten under charming difficulties amid a jumble of furniture.

It was about seven o'clock when they entered the sitting-room, and there was no indication as yet that their mother was astir. The sunshine came pouring in as they drew up the blinds, revealing a fascinating disorder. The big box and the little one stood side by side ready to be filled, but nearly everything to go into them encumbered the sofa and table, and overflowed on to odd chairs. Tin pails (in each of which reposed a gaudy indiarubber ball) and rather formidable-looking spades were ranged near the boxes. The spades had indeed been veritably extorted from Agnes; they having turned up their noses at the tiny wooden ones she had at first selected, the rebellious May even petulantly declaring her indifference to "the sea-side" and her desire to stay at home. "The sea-side" associated with so amateurish an instrument seemed a bleak and uninteresting place

indeed. Even larger specimens in wood failed to seduce them from their attitude of "no compromise," for Gwenny, too, had been stung into resistance by the insult their mother's choice implied. Did she think they were babies of three? Agnes yielded at last, flinching under the eye of the bazaar-keeper, who might think her a harsh mother. (Agnes's sensitiveness to public opinion was in its way quite remarkable.)

The children stole round the room, gazing at all the finery that lay about, but scarcely daring to touch anything. The few articles yet to be finished, and in the sewing of which they were to help, had been put together on the table, of which only a single flap was left free. After feasting their eyes for awhile on all these treasures, they drew chairs over to the window and sat talking, quietly enough, for fear of disturbing their mother. They liked the feeling of the early morning and the silent street, and they enjoyed being at the top of the house and having it all to themselves. The last time they had moved Agnes had thought of taking a lower floor. But the children had demurred strongly. They invested top floors with a certain amount of mystery; "you were so close to the roof," and there were wonderful secrets between them about the strange regions that lay above it. And then there was the stairway which it would have pleased them to be able to draw up after them like a ladder, so as to feel in a house of their own built at the top of a giant tree.

"I wonder where the sands lead to?" said May musingly.

"Nobody knows," explained Gwenny; "because if you go too far the tide comes in and you get drowned, unless you can climb up the high white cliffs. There is a story in our reading-book of a boy who disobeyed his mother and nearly did get drowned that way."

"But where do the high cliffs lead to?" insisted May, who had not yet begun geography.

"If you were to go for hundreds and hundreds of miles to the North, you would come to Scotland," said the elder and more learned sister.

"Scotland! That is where St. Andrew came from in 'The Seven Knights of Christendom,'" returned May, humiliated at her sister's superior knowledge and anxious to display her own.

"I should like to sail over the sea to distant countries," said Gwenny irrelevantly. She was now occupied with imaginings of her own.

"Oh," said May; "that *would* be splendid. To stand on the deck of a ship and see the white sails fill out in the breeze and nothing but water as far as the eye can reach!"

"And what if a storm came?" supposed Gwenny.

"I should love to see a storm at sea," returned May ecstatically.

"Only the sailors are allowed on deck, because the waves break over the ship," explained Gwenny; "and then you might be sea-sick."

"Not everybody's sea-sick," returned May indignantly. "Besides, I could see the storm through the little windows."

"The ship would toss up and down too much. Perhaps we may see a storm from the shore, if we're lucky. I should like, too, to see what a ship is like inside. Shouldn't you like to see a really big ship, May?"

"Perhaps uncle will row us out in a boat when he comes, and take us on board one as it sails by."

"The captain wouldn't stop, you silly," said Gwenny.

"He would for uncle," insisted May, who had intense faith in Hubert.

Gwenny was silent. It seemed disrespectful and even arrogant on her part to attempt to assign a limit to Hubert's influence, and so May had the appearance of carrying off a victory.

Agnes did not appear till eight o'clock. At the first glance the children noticed she looked rather cross, and they at once formed disagreeable anticipations for the day. This first glance was habitual with them, for the capricious Agnes had a much-varying temper. One day affectionate, smiling, and confidential, the next she would be distinctly stand-offish and authoritative; and

if she began the morning snappishly and irritably, there were usually squalls before bedtime. But all this was for the children only part of the natural order of things, and they did not know that all mothers were not the same as theirs.

"I declare I haven't had five minutes' sleep the whole night," she complained. "I felt all broken in bits—what with slaving all the week for your pleasure, my ladies."

They breakfasted at a tiny corner of the table. May got into trouble for making too many crumbs, and Gwenny for having no appetite. Moreover the damaged lustre happened to catch their mother's eye which had been wandering round in search of something to annoy it. The still absent prism inspired her to many severe observations.

However, after breakfast, all three got to work with needle and scissors, and when they stopped at midday there were only the finishing touches to be put. The afternoon went in packing, an operation scoldingly carried through by Agnes, who more than once succeeded in making the children cry.

At supper she sat silently at table with an air of fatigue and sadness. She sipped her cocoa languidly, her eye-lids downcast as though she had a strong inclination to weep.

"It's not much pleasure I shall get out of it," she began at length. "If it weren't that *you* can't go alone I'd much rather stay at home," she said at last brokenly.

"But the seaside isn't only for children," argued May daringly.

"Oh, it's all right when you've your own money to pay for things, but it isn't very sweet spending other people's."

"We can't help being poor," said Gwenny. "I'm sure uncle wants us to enjoy ourselves."

"Little fool!" said Agnes witheringly. "Why do you think Mr. Ruthven gives us a seaside holiday? It is to satisfy his own pride. Why do you think he gives us any money at all? Because he is a grand gentleman

and he wouldn't like anybody connected with him to be doing low work, as he calls it."

"Oh no, mother," expostulated the children.

"A lot you know about the world!" exclaimed Agnes angrily. "But one day you'll find out I was right. He's a single gentleman now, but before long he'll be wanting to marry a lady—one of your extravagant sort. She'll ruin him sooner than he thinks."

They looked frightened, but Agnes was too self-centred to notice the effect she was producing. She did not usually tell them things to make them feel as miserable as she felt, but simply from the need of voicing her thoughts—her fears and her resentments—in the hearing of somebody. And these two little ones were the only bodies to whom she could pour herself out. For her cronies she reserved quite another version of the family position, Hubert figuring as a great and generous man, and her mother-in-law as a county lady of the highest standing. They both loved and respected her and would do anything for her and the children, but, of course, her self-respect would only allow her to accept from them as much as would suffice to bring up the children, who were their own flesh and blood.

"After all, it wouldn't do to let the world know my bitter situation," she would afterwards explain to the children, should they have happened to overhear her entertaining some neighbour with such amiable confidences. "I'm much too proud, I am, to have everybody pitying me. Oh, no, I don't want anybody's pity!"

So, heedless that she had wantonly dashed their spirits, she rose from the table and went moodily to her bedroom. Her withdrawal, however, had merely a practical motive. She wished to transfer to her purse from her private hoard enough money to pay their initial expenses. The hoard, swollen at one blow by the proceeds of Hubert's cheque from fifty to eighty pounds (more than ever the potentiality of a lodging-house of her own, should Hubert fail them), was entirely in gold, and was disposed in a small linen bag enswathed amid wadding in a pretty glove-box, the whole kept locked in

the chest of drawers. She had no intention, of course, of leaving the main treasure behind her when departing from home.

She unlocked the drawer, pulled it open, and her morose look gave place to one of satisfaction as she drew out the long, narrow glove-box. She even paused for a moment to admire the picture of the red-coated hunting-man and the pack of hounds on the lid. At last she opened it and plunged her fingers amid the wadding. Presently her expression changed, and she tore out the wadding frantically. Then she gave a great scream.

The children came running in, white and scared.

"What is it, mother, what is it?"

"My God! oh, my God!" she moaned.

They stood by in helpless bewilderment.

"Little fools, little fools, don't you see that every farthing has gone? My God, to be robbed of every farthing!" She stood trembling, masses of wadding in her clenched hands, then fell a-muttering and a-moaning like a maniac.

The children stole over to her, but she sank on to the floor and covered her face with her hands. Save the death of her husband, it was the greatest catastrophe of her life!

For some moments there was a terrifying silence; then came an hysteric outburst of scream after scream.

Their landlady soon came hurrying up, in almost as great a fright as the children. What in Heaven's name had happened?

"If you please, ma'am," said May, not forgetting her manners even at such a crisis, "mother's been robbed."

After some trouble the landlady, who was already trembling at the possibility of an accusation against her family, managed to elicit from Agnes the extent of the calamity.

"All my savings of years," declared Agnes piteously. "I toiled and moiled and wore my fingers to the bone and blinded myself sewing—nothing was too hard for me, if I could save a penny by it. It's enough to make

a body kill herself. Oh, my God! oh, my God!" And she began sobbing again broken-heartedly.

The landlady, in neighbourly fashion, did her best for poor Agnes, and, when she had succeeded in soothing her a little, helped her to search the room—with a result which, by justifying Agnes's want of faith in the process, gave the latter a slightly mitigating sensation of triumph. To the relief of the landlady, she had little doubt as to the culprit. The charwoman whom, on account of her busy week of preparation, she had had in every day must have got some knowledge of the treasure, and have found a key to fit the lock of the drawer. As the woman's address was known to both, the landlady suggested they should go there immediately. Agnes shook her head. By this time the woman was probably in New Zealand! Nevertheless, she was ultimately induced to put on her bonnet and totter out on the other's arm.

The children returned to the sitting-room, where they waited in suspense, scarcely daring to interchange a word. Occasionally they let their eyes rest mournfully on the packed boxes, on the pails, the spades, the gaudy indiarubber balls; for somehow they felt "the seaside" had moved off to an infinite distance.

When eventually they heard the two women enter the house again they could not help feeling vaguely hopeful. But the tears that were running down their mother's cheeks pointed only too clearly to failure. The charwoman, a vague widow who had been occupying a furnished room in a poor back street, had altogether disappeared.

The calamity was irretrievable.

The landlady sat with them for awhile, but had to go down at last to put her own children to bed. Agnes cried quietly for a long time, and then sat as one stunned.

Long into the night the children lay awake listening to the dulled sound of her moaning and sobbing.

XI

HUBERT jumped out of bed with the fear that he had overslept himself, and was relieved to find it was only a few minutes after seven. By half-past seven he had dressed; then, swallowing a cup of coffee, which he had boiled over a spirit-lamp, he took up his hat with the intention of proceeding at once to the railway station.

But at that moment an unexpected visitor came knocking—a respectable-looking, bonneted young woman whose features were vaguely familiar to him, though he could not definitely recall her. She was quite breathless and evidently much agitated, despite her attempt to give him a calm "Good-morning, sir," as she followed him into his study in response to his invitation.

"I've come from 27, Lissold-street," she explained, observing he was waiting for her to speak. "I am Mrs. Carter."

Agnes's landlady, he recollected now! He had once or twice caught sight of her on his visits to the house.

"You bring me some message from Mrs. Ruthven, I presume."

He saw her lips twitch nervously and her eyes gleam at him strangely.

"I'm afraid I've bad news for you, sir," she breathed at last.

They faced each other for an intense moment, then with abrupt determination she let him have the worst at once.

"Mrs. Ruthven cut her throat in the night. This morning we found her stone dead."

Hubert was at first merely aware that the woman had

said something ; there was an appreciable interval before he found he had grasped what. He noted almost gratefully that he was calm and collected.

"I had better come at once," he said quietly.

"If you will, sir," said the young woman.

They went off in a cab, Mrs. Carter enlightening him on the journey about the whole affair. How pitifully unnecessary this crowning act of Agnes seemed to him. Why, he would merely have smiled at the catastrophe that had depressed her mind to insanity, and would have replaced the lost hoard twice over !

But he could not think too much, for his companion, who had expended all her powers of directness in conveying the news to him, had now yielded to a natural volubility that was scarcely characterized by orderliness and precision. Sometimes, disturbed by her proximity to so deep a drama and so fine a gentleman, she lost herself altogether, and her excited tongue floundered into incoherence. He helped and guided her as far as possible, eliciting that the children had cried for him, and that she had taken them down to her own parlour, where she had left them in the company of her own little girl.

The cab drew up outside the little house. A crowd of neighbours and children were gathered round the garden gate. A burly sergeant of police stood in the doorway.

After a brief conversation with the officer, Hubert accompanied Mrs. Carter into the house. He would not go upstairs now, but thought it best to take the children away at once.

He found them cowed and silent, their eye-lids red and their faces tear-stained. The landlady's little girl sat eyeing them stiffly, quite unequal to the task of administering comfort. At sight of Hubert they jumped up eagerly and came to him. He kissed them gently.

"What are we to do without mother ?" asked May, bursting into tears again. "It will be so lonely upstairs all by ourselves, and, besides, we can't cook."

"Oh, I've come to fetch you away, little girls," said Hubert huskily. "I want you to come and live with me—if you'll let me take you."

"Oh, yes," they cried. "Take us, uncle; please take us."

Book II
The Guardian

I

HUBERT had much to do during the next week or two, though dazed by the sudden tragedy, and, despite all the bustle, only half believing in it. Yet the inquest on poor Agnes, the funeral, and the dispersion of her little home were saddening realities, alleviated only by the kindness of his friends towards the children. Hubert had been unwilling to place them under the care of a stranger, and he was more than grateful when Marvin, an artist friend of his own and Preston's, who lived in Tite-street, with a sister to keep house for him, offered to take charge of them till Hubert could carry out what he had in contemplation, to wit, to establish himself in the country within the hour's journey from town.

Though the shock the children had sustained was too great to be thrown off at once, the change of life, delightful in itself, helped greatly to distract them. Marvin, a great bearded figure in an ancient velvet jacket, with a thick black head of hair, enormous features, and a laugh that had in it something of the power of an organ roll, seemed to them one of those friendly giants that make such faithful henchmen to handsome little princes. Being a childless widower, he was as pleased with them as they were with him, and gave them the free run of his studio, an apartment of generous spaces and full of objects to wonder over. Marvin happened to be working just then with an Italian model dressed as a cardinal, and the children would sit in half-awed, shy silence, following with their eyes the luscious strokes of the painter's brush, or watching the intent expression of his large features, as every now and again he stood away from the canvas to scruti-

nize it, or level the brush at the model in mysterious measurement.

At intervals, and all the while working, Marvin would relate to them the most wonderful things—including legends about the strange figures carved on his crumbling oak cabinets, and eye-opening explanations of the pictures on the strange old screens or on the seats and backs of some of the chairs. And, when they were not in the studio, there was Miss Marvin—the sister—to see they were contentedly occupied. She was a gentle lady, and bestowed endless attention on them. Besides, Preston, who had now made their acquaintance, came to see them every day, and often when Hubert arrived in the late afternoon he would find his friend had decamped with one or other of them.

For the first time the children had the sensation of never being scolded. Miss Marvin, indeed, appeared to them an extraordinarily confiding person, who neither screamed at them, nor threatened, nor wept, and who had, somehow, not yet discovered they were inherently wicked with the wickedness of their father's family. So well, in fact, did they stand in her good graces that they trembled lest she should find them out.

Hubert's new arrangements were meanwhile progressing. His new duties and interests so possessed him, indeed, that he never once caught himself puzzling again about Miss Hardyng's features. That charming young person had, in fact, got totally banished from his mind. And as for his engagement to visit Preston's sister in Flintshire, he had preferred to break that off now; likewise thinking it best to refuse her friendly suggestion (for which he was nevertheless deeply grateful) that the children should be included in the invitation, or, at least, be sent down to stay with her till his own new home was ready. He did not wish to lose any time now, and the children were too shy to welcome the idea of going away from him entirely.

And when, after some inquiry and searching, he finally took possession of a small old-world house, ready furnished, that stood in some few acres of ground

amid undulating landscape, the prospect would have seemed of the pleasantest were it not for the shadow cast by the tragedy that alone had made it possible.

The world, somehow, seemed all changed now as if some mighty hand had seized it and given it a twist; Hubert, indeed, never having rid himself of his first bewilderment at the change. So great was his sense of responsibility for the two precious lives committed to his care that he went about hushed and solemn, with the feeling as of a whole planet dependent on him.

II

THE children's new-found friends were loath to part with them, but the time to say "good-bye" had at last arrived. It was a beautiful morning when May and Gwenny drove off with Hubert to catch an early train for Lynford—the quaint little town within easy reach of which their new home was situated.

August was only just drawing to an end, and the best of Hubert's vacation was still before him; so that he would be able to spend all his time with the children in order to start them off in their new life with a delightful holiday. In the weeks that had elapsed since the tragedy, they had, to a large extent, been able to throw off the cloud—thanks to the efforts of their big friends; and he was, above all, anxious to keep them forgetful of their grief. Terribly as Agnes had plagued them, her love for them, as he knew, had had primitive depths, and they certainly had loved her in return as little children always love their mother. And thus, whenever the thought of her thrust itself into their minds, they would begin to cry almost hysterically. But that, happily, was only at moments; for grief cannot prevail against the swift blood of tender years.

The great Waterloo terminus proved an exciting and absorbing wonder—what with its mighty iron pillars and marvellous network of a roof, and great jostling crowds, and porters a-wheeling trolleys piled high with holiday luggage, and mysterious doors on all sides leading to strange interiors, and equally puzzling windows that had a provoking air of refusing to explain themselves. Then they were half-dazed by all the fearful noises—the stir of myriad comings and goings, the

clanking of steel, the hissing of steam, the sudden screech of engines that set their hearts a-thumping.

At last they were seated in their carriage. But even before the train began to move there were many delectable objects within reach of vision of which they eagerly sought explanation—the stands full of big lamps, the signal boxes, the odd poles with coloured cross-pieces at the summit that raised and depressed themselves, the assemblage of signals that stretched athwart the sky like a complicated bar of music in mid-air, and last, but not least, they were fascinated by the empty space between them and the other platform, into which an incoming train came presently gliding, the pistons working in and out of the cylinders so smoothly, the strange grooved wheels taking the rails so easily.

Then came the last spurt of activity on the platform, the hurrying of belated passengers, the slamming of doors, and—great delicious moment!—off they went slowly, slowly, quicker, quicker—

It was an enchanted hour as they sped through the summer landscapes. The panorama of the country, ripe under the autumn sun, unrolled itself before them in splendid stretches of field and common and wooded hill-side, with scattered cattle, and thatched houses, and gleaming spires in the distance, and grey church towers; with lovely wayside pools and winding rivers that reflected the laughing skies and the overhanging willows. Sometimes a slow goods-train would come dragging itself along, picturesquely laden with gravel, sand, coal, mould, and nice-looking machinery, to say nothing of the endless trucks of all shapes and sizes, from the windows of some of which meek-eyed horses would thrust out their patient heads. And sometimes everything would tantalizingly disappear, hidden from the view by high chalky embankments, exciting harbingers—false harbingers sometimes!—of a sudden plunge into darkness.

Hubert caught the eagerness of the children, feeling his jaded senses reviving and freshening. Things took on a new sharpness of outline, a new interest and

beauty. Something of the far-off feeling of his own childhood came back to him, of the immeasurable joy of the first years of life in mere existence, in breathing, moving, in the exercise of the senses. He was seeing as they saw, and was almost tremulously happy as he watched their deep delight, now repressed, now breaking out in excited exclamation.

"How wonderful it is to see all the things we have read about in books!" said Gwenny almost breathlessly, as they flew past a farmstead with thatched out-buildings and hayricks, and horses, cows and poultry a-feeding.

"Oh, but look this side!" exclaimed May, who was stationed at the opposite window.

They had the carriage to themselves, and the children kept passing from one side to the other, distracted by the double panorama from fidelity to the charms of either.

Lynford came all too soon, but their envy of the other people in the train who were going on further was quickly displaced by their eager curiosity as to the experiences that were immediately to follow.

Soon, to their surprise, they found they were to be driven to their new home by their own man in their own trap!—for Hubert had engaged the very respectable and trustworthy couple who had been at the house for several years past, as they were willing to undertake the entire work, and the man had had the garden under his special care.

In a few minutes they were clear of the sleepy town and cutting along through the pretty countryside between cornfields and rich common, with hills in the distance on either hand. Eventually they turned off the main road into an old lane that wound its way between high hedgerows; and presently it began to descend and ran through a wood of pine-trees that scented the air deliciously. A little later on they were passing between a long cobble-stone garden wall on their right and a pine-covered slope that rose sharply on their left and stretched away as far as the eye could reach. Hereabouts lay some score of houses, all delightfully scattered

and hidden. And surely their own house was the most hidden of all. For though the children from their seat in the vehicle could command a view of two or three of the houses and of bits of some others, they were much astonished when the trap pulled up, a moment or two later, apparently in the middle of an avenue over-roofed by boughs from both sides.

They got down and Hubert took them through a little rusty wooden gate, and along a path that wound steeply upwards and lost itself in the thick of the plantation. The empty trap had driven off at once.

"Is this the way to the house?" they asked.

"Yes, the back way," he chuckled. "The trap has gone round to the front."

He had done this purposely to let them get a bewildering glimpse of their whole domain, of which here was the extreme boundary. They followed the tortuous path through their own little forest, then emerged into a splendid field, prettily hedged in and all grown wild with tangled grass and oats knee-deep. But, keeping to their path, they skirted round it, and eventually passed through another little gate into another plantation; clearing which they came in full sight of the house standing at the end of a beautiful lawn. And all along the sides were lovely flower-beds, and here and there large glass-houses; and beyond everything again were more thick plantations. The house itself was built on three floors, with many gables, and with a verandah all round it. There were also several out-buildings—sheds and stabling and coach-house.

They crossed the lawn and passed round the verandah to the front of the house. Here was another beautiful lawn with a great cluster of bushes in the centre, and many flower-beds and thick shrubberies all round. On the other side of the hedgerow that bounded this smaller garden ran the main roadway, and a broad gravel drive led from the barred carriage-gate right up to the quaint trellised porch of the front door. Across the road some neighbour's plantation shot up behind a high wall, so that altogether they were perfectly secluded.

The children ran to the gate to wait for the expected trap, and, sure enough, it came along after a few minutes, for it had had to go a long distance round. They were quite pleased to see it again, though they had a delightfully vague feeling about the geography of this enchanted region, and the way the reappearance of the trap had been effected.

III

AFTER looking over the house, full of unexpected and often mysterious nooks and corners, the children were installed in their own room by Mrs. Armstrong, a motherly body whom they liked at once. They had an outlook sideways over the tops of the trees and right away across rich country that was dotted with old black mills. Moreover, the room had actually five sides, besides a deep alcove and a great ancient hearth and fireplace; so that they could not make up their minds whether it would be jollier to stop there most of the time or to play in the grounds, to say nothing of the temptation of the strange lofts and garrets.

Hubert himself had taken possession of the drawing-room and converted it into a study. It was a pleasant chamber at the back of the house, opening on the verandah through two French windows. There was also a fine bay widow at the side that looked out through a slight break in the plantation on a splendid view of distant hills. Here was massed together everything that had come up from Pump Court (including the Dutch escritoire and the old Frisian clock); and the shelves, newly fitted up, were ready to receive the heaps and heaps of volumes. Gwenny and May, stealing down from above, found Hubert already busily at work, and were mightily pleased at being allowed to help him.

They were thus happily occupied till lunch-time, when they sat down to the most delicious meal they had ever eaten. In the afternoon Hubert had letters to write, so the children went wandering into the garden, intent on exploration. But they could not at all make up their minds where to begin. They kept passing round the

verandah from the front to the back, and from the back to the front, lingering, of course, under the drawing-room side window where the break in the trees revealed the big landscape. At last they made for the wood right at the end, retracing the long, complicated way to the little rusty gate by which they had entered in the morning. Then the exploration began in earnest.

In the course of the afternoon they made several delightful discoveries. One they were particularly pleased with was of a secret path running behind a shrubbery that was parallel with the lawn, and leading eventually past the kitchen windows and right to the front of the house, where they were surprised to find themselves again. They peeped into the vinery and glass-houses, and they found many splendid hiding-places through dipping at random into the dim depths of the plantations that skirted the garden everywhere—though always to find themselves stopped in the end by some overgrown fence or cobble-stone wall that sternly bounded the domain. Finally, for a change they chased each other through the wild-grown field, their little bodies sometimes completely lost to view where the tangles were thickest. London was already forgotten.

They came back at tea-time with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes, happy, laughing, and full of their discoveries.

Meantime Hubert had finished his correspondence. Most important of all these letters was the one to his mother—the first he had addressed to her for over two years. Once or twice before he had sat down to inform her of all that had happened, but he had never carried out the intention. He did not know what view she might take of the position, or, if she took any notice of the communication at all, in what way she might attempt to hamper him. To avoid trying emotions for both, he had decided to wait till he had taken his house and got everything settled. Even now it had been a difficult letter for him to write, and, after much consideration he had thought it best to limit himself to a statement of the facts, to make no reference to old

hostilities, and to assume by implication it was natural for him to write to her and for her to be interested in what concerned him so deeply. Indeed, he ended by taking her into his confidence, telling her how content he was now in this little place of his own, and how he looked forward to supervising the education of the children and making them as happy as possible. He concluded with the hope that he might bring them one day to see her, and remained her affectionate son.

IV

MRS. RUTHVEN replied almost immediately.

"MY DEAR HUBERT—

"How foolish of you with your inexperience to attempt to set up house for yourself. From your description of the place I feel sure you have been finely imposed upon. It seems to be a mere barn, and it will certainly come tumbling about your ears long before the end of the term for which you were rash enough to take it at so exorbitant a rental. Two hundred pounds, too, for a few shabby sticks, when so much furniture just now is to be picked up for a mere song! I cannot rest in peace while you are throwing away money that has been so hard-earned. It makes my heart bleed to think of the years I pinched and pinched, and now the fruits of my self-denial are to be squandered without a thought. Of course what has been done cannot be undone, but I should be failing in my duty if I did not warn you against these wasteful courses for the future. I cannot tell you how alarmed I am at the idea of your entrusting the whole management of your household to a servant who is quite a stranger to you, and who will be tempted to take advantage of you at every point—especially as you are perfectly ignorant of the details of keeping house. It would be different if you were married to a nice domesticated girl of good family, with some fortune of her own! But without such a mistress to control expenditure and check waste it was nothing less than madness to do what you have done. The best I can think of for you is to send you my own Martha Chapman. She

has been with me over twenty years, I have trained her perfectly, and she is trustworthy and capable. She will make you an efficient housekeeper, and although it is a great hardship for me to part with her, I will yet suffer the inconvenience for your sake. Indeed, I have no idea what I shall do without her. I need hardly say she is most economical and will put her foot down most firmly against all wastefulness. She will certainly save her cost five times over, and if your present servants make any nonsense about her, send them packing.

"Your affectionate mother,

"HELEN RUTHVEN."

Whereat Hubert laughed and rubbed his hands in high good humour, even though she had, as yet, said not a word about the children. He at once wrote again, saying he was quite certain Martha Chapman would be an invaluable acquisition to any household, and he did not know how to thank her enough for her kindness in being so ready to surrender so indispensable a servant. It would, however, be selfish of him to accept such a sacrifice from her, so that he thought he had best try to rub along as well as he could. He managed to express these sentiments without any touch of sarcasm.

A morning or two later he received his mother's final mandate. "It is my wish that Martha Chapman goes to you at once. For Heaven's sake don't begin to show consideration for me at this eleventh hour. You've shown precious little all your life, so I certainly don't want you to begin to think about my convenience and talk about my sacrifices now. May the Almighty forgive that poor creature for the wrong she did to my Edward."

Immediately after lunch on the same day, when Hubert had sat down at his desk and was on the point of assuring his mother that he desired nothing better than the prompt arrival of Martha Chapman, he heard a vehicle driving up to the porch, and, in a minute, to his great astonishment, his mother herself stood in

the doorway of his study. There was an appreciable interval before he had presence of mind enough to throw down his pen and rise.

His mother had scarcely changed in the last couple of years. Dressed simply in black, she was of middle height and rather squarely built, though with no inclination to stoutness. Her silvery hair seemed to set off the more the strength of her virile features; her eyes were black and piercing and deep-set under a high forehead. She came stamping into the room with a dignified stiffness that suggested rheumatism and good-breeding.

"I thought so," were her first words. "The paving outside the porch is all cracked and broken, and the carriage-gate hasn't had a coat of paint for years. Where were your wits, clever Hubert, when you agreed to give a hundred a year for this tumble-down place."

"Is there any paving outside the porch?" he asked himself under his breath, cursing his masculine unobservant eye. "But you must have been travelling for hours," he exclaimed. "You must be fagged out and I'm sure you've had no lunch to-day."

"Oh, we had a biscuit and some lemonade—horrible gassy stuff!" grumbled Mrs. Ruthven. She permitted him to kiss her, though apparently she displayed no enthusiasm about it. "But come, I don't like the looks of you any more than I like the looks of your house. You've not been taking proper care of yourself." Despite her sedulous heed to exhibit no sign of propitiation there was a distinct shade of anxiety in her voice.

"It was so stuffy in town, and I dare say I overworked a bit, but I'll soon pull round again. You've brought Chapman with you?"

"Certainly. And I dare say you can give me a bed to-night. I'll look over the place and just talk over things with her; after which I must leave you to do the best you can between you. She's in the fly at the door with her boxes, but I think it was high time she got down and came into the house. Which reminds me—I must go and pay the man."

"Be seated, mother, please. I'll see to everything."

"Two shillings—not a penny more," she called after him. "That was the bargain. And you might tell the servant to give poor Martha a bite of something. She must be quite faint."

"I hope you didn't give the man a penny more than his two shillings," said Mrs. Ruthven when Hubert entered the room again. "He misrepresented the distance, the impertinent fellow! And now I think I'll look over the house. No, no, don't disturb yourself—I can find my way about."

"They've put your bag in the front room just above," said Hubert, giving his mother her head, and almost smiling at the volley of sharp criticism she was certain to fire at him on her return from her expedition.

While she was away upstairs, he had some lunch prepared for her, then spent the time before her reappearance in amused reflection. Evidently she had taken possession of the place, and he had but little doubt it would now remain under her sovereignty. She would hold the personal representative she was now installing directly responsible to her for the conduct of affairs, and elaborate inquiries, instructions and counsel would from time to time issue from head-quarters. All this he did not mind, so long as she took the children into her good graces.

In paying him this visit, he argued, she must have come prepared to see them. But he thought it would be a pity to call them in at once and make them submit to the ordeal of a formal presentation to so terribly critical a person, who had certainly no bias in their favour to begin with. Better, he decided, for her to come across them as they chased each other through the tangled field—he supposed they were just then engaged in that enchanting diversion—when any untidiness resulting from the romp could scarcely be counted against them.

When Mrs. Ruthven descended again Hubert was able to coax her into eating some lunch.

"The view isn't at all bad from the window," she ad-

mitted; "and the air is quite good. But the house is dear—very!"

Hubert explained it was the garden had attracted him—he had fallen in love with that at first sight, so that he had scarcely considered the house.

"It's a pity," said his mother vaguely, and she went on to entertain him with details of houses and rental values in her own neighbourhood. She also commented unfavourably on his distance from town and the expense of the daily journeys. But, of course, the mischief had been done and he understood his own business best. She, of course, would not be led into offering him advice; she had long since learnt he must be allowed to go his own way, even to the extent of misconducting his whole life. It was really ridiculous for a man to make up his mind to be an old bachelor—with so many nice girls in the world, too. But, of course, she wasn't going to say another word about that. Even if he *had* taken poor Edward's two little girls, that was no reason why he should give up the idea of marrying. On the contrary, he ought to look about him all the more, especially as he was settled in a house of his own. Besides, who *was* there to look after the children? Did he mean them to run wild whilst he was doing his work miles away?

Hubert set forth his ideas, how he intended to find some nice governess in the neighbourhood to spend the mornings with them; for he meant they should work as well as play.

"You ought to get some elderly person, to my thinking," said Mrs. Ruthven.

"Oh, I sha'n't fall in love with the young person," Hubert assured her laughingly.

But his mother didn't like that kind of jest and took him up rather sharply. "You may fall in love with whom you please. I have long since ceased to interest myself in the subject. I wash my hands of the whole matter."

This, however, was only an interjection on her part, and did not really interrupt the conversation. Hubert let her go fully into the question of his household expendi-

ture ; and, afterwards, as they became more friendly, he related, at her own request, the history of the weeks immediately preceding, in greater minuteness than he had been able to do in his letter.

Meanwhile she had finished her lunch, and now at his suggestion she accompanied him into the garden. She had already supposed that Gwenny and May were at play, and he had confirmed the supposition. But when they came to the field, which the children, for the time being, had annexed as their favourite place of recreation, they did not at first catch sight of the pair. It was only after some searching that the little ones were discovered hidden amid the tall wild oats and grass, and reading a fairy story out of the same book. The few days of country air had done wonders for them. They were beautiful sylph-like children, and their fresh little eager faces sparkled with life under their nut-brown hair that showed soft and fine-spun in the full afternoon sunlight. So engrossed were they in their story that they did not stir till Mrs. Ruthven and Hubert had ploughed their way quite close to them. They both rose to their feet shamefacedly.

"Were you looking for us, uncle, please?" asked Gwenny, with a marked politeness that was quite nice and pretty, though she was blushing timidly in the presence of the strange, stern old lady.

"Yes, little girl," said Hubert. "Your——"

"You don't know me, do you?" asked Mrs. Ruthven, interrupting him.

They looked at her hard, but, as they could not remember her, they kept silent. They had an idea it would be impolite to admit they didn't know her.

"Of course you don't—you've never seen me before, little geese! And yet you've heard a great deal about me, I'll be bound."

They were puzzled and vaguely ashamed. They hung their heads guiltily.

"No, we haven't seen you before, if you please," said May, plucking up courage.

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"You are distant relations of mine," explained the old woman, chuckling.

"Oh," they exclaimed, looking suddenly interested.

"If you would kindly tell us your name, we should, of course, remember," suggested Gwenny.

"I am the old ogre, the cruel, unforgiving, hard-hearted mother-in-law, the black, the stuck-up, the—the—everything that's bad. Come, come, who is the old woman you were taught to hate?"

Gwenny flushed and agitatedly dropped her book which she had been holding wide open.

"Ah—you are poor Edward's mother," cried May in triumphant identification.

"Oh, May!" said Gwenny reproachfully, colouring still more deeply.

"Poor Edward's mother," repeated Mrs. Ruthven. "I should think it was poor Edward! And what were you told about me?"

They were silent, looking much distressed and very self-conscious indeed.

"Of course you hate me. But come now, do I look so hateful?"

"Oh, no, indeed," said poor Gwenny, with the instinct of good-breeding. "You look very nice."

Mrs. Ruthven laughed heartily, though there were tears beneath the laughter. "You little flatterer! Come, tell me now, what did your mother teach you to believe about me?"

At this May began suddenly to cry, and Gwenny's eyes, too, filled with tears.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mrs. Ruthven. "You mustn't cry, little girl, you really mustn't. I am quite as nice as I look, I assure you."

She was quite sorry she had so awkwardly reminded them of their loss. She drew May close to her and dried her tears.

"No, no, my dear," she went on, fondling the child's hair and cheek. "You must forget all the evil things you've heard about your grandmother. She is a very, very gentle and loving grandmother, and she will love

you always if you will promise to love her. Now promise me."

"Yes, I will love you always," sobbed May.

"And you, Gwenny?" said Mrs. Ruthven, drawing her over with one hand, while she encircled May's neck with the other.

"Yes, grandmother, I will love you," said Gwenny.

"Always?"

"Yes, always, grandmother."

"Then kiss me!"

One after the other she lifted them up, kissing them again and again hysterically.

In this way was sealed the reconciliation between Hubert and his mother.

When, the next day, he saw her to the station, she broached a point she had on her mind.

"There is just one question I should like to ask you, Hubert, before we say good-bye; and that is what provision is it your intention to make for the religious instruction of the children? I suppose, of course, that that poor creature did not entirely neglect her duties but instilled into them some notion at least of religious principles. You have, of course, considered this subject."

"Yes, I have considered it," he answered, sorry the question should have been raised just at this last moment—though her anxiety in this respect was certainly a token of the absoluteness with which she now regarded them as of the family. "I am afraid you'll not think my reply very satisfactory, but you know my free ideas. They have been to school, where they have received the usual religious teaching. But so far as it is possible to do so now, I want to leave their minds absolutely free. They shall always have before them the highest ideals of right, justice, and good-will, which they shall learn to love from the purest impulses. And when they grow up they shall be free to choose—if they wish for any formal religion. You need have no fear that they will be taught irreverence. On the contrary, they shall learn to look on true religion with the greatest respect. When they are old

enough to judge for themselves, and they elect for the formal religion, I shall respect their choice, which, at least, is bound to be sincere."

"I am sorry, Hubert: I am much concerned indeed," said Mrs. Ruthven. "But I shall pray to the Almighty that He may turn their hearts to Him . . . I should have wished that you yourself might have grown up otherwise. Ah, well, I must bear my pain, since my hopes were not to be realized. Ah, Hubert, you little know how you have hurt me. Good-bye, dear."

She gave him the warmest kiss he had had from her for many years; and, a moment later, he waved his hand to her as the train moved off.

V

AS Hubert had foreseen, Lady Wycliffe and her world had already passed far away from him ; and that quite irrespective of the change in his own life. As time went by he found himself approving more and more his having withheld his confidence from her, and he certainly did not deem it essential now voluntarily to inform her of his move to the country and what had led up to it. If she ever wished to communicate with him, his address at the Temple was as heretofore ; certainly she had yet to show that her interest in him had been more than ephemeral, a mere caprice of her sentimental disposition—a possibility he, with his pride, was not prepared to appreciate. And so he preferred to remain silent until she should, of herself, evince her desire to maintain their acquaintanceship on as cordial a basis as at the beginning.

In other ways, too, his life narrowed perceptibly—though only for a surer concentration on his own home. After the recess, town became only the scene of his daily work. Each afternoon he hurried away from the Temple at the earliest moment, so that clubs and political circles knew less and less of him, and many acquaintanceships languished. Preston for the present had settled down for a long sojourn in Wales, but any desire on even his part for more than a few hurried minutes of Hubert's society could only be gratified by his coming to Lynford at week-ends.

Meanwhile, Hubert was living in perfect contentment. In the past he had, at the best of times, scarcely ventured to look forward to as much as this. Despite his mother's disapproval of his bachelorhood, he had now once more relegated the idea of marrying to the vaguenesses of the

distant future. If the thought of Miss Hardynges ever crossed his mind, it was only to raise a smile. Marriage in his career must now be a mere accident, the crowning act of some quick drama that should take him by surprise.

The little family soon learnt to find its way about the countryside, and adjusted itself harmoniously to the conditions of life in that particular corner of civilisation. An accomplished girl of about sixteen (the daughter of a local doctor who resided in the town) was engaged to continue their school work with the children, and to initiate them in music and drawing. When the new routine came into force the children accordingly studied with Miss Williams in the mornings, and were free to play or read for the rest of the day, provided they had got through the lessons set them. On Saturday afternoons Hubert would often take them for a long drive, with a halt for tea at some picturesque farmhouse. Moreover, there was a never-ending story he was inventing for them, of which he was always ready with an instalment on demand; and in more serious moments he had many a confidential little chat with them. For their own recreation they had a swing in the garden, and quantities of ingenious toys, and boxes of water-colours, and endless picture-books; each, besides, having her corner of ground to cultivate at her pleasure. But in addition to their own territory there was another wonderful place they loved to visit—a large market-garden some twenty minutes' walk from the house. It was hidden by high hedges, and stretched from the roadway towards the hills. The children were allowed to wander among the gooseberry bushes and pick the fruit at will, for the owner, Mr. Hutchings, a fascinating, gnarled, sun-burnt figure, supplied the house with milk, butter, honey, fruit, and poultry. Moreover, the further end of the market-garden was bounded by a shallow brook, whose knobby, mossy bottom was clearly visible in all its strange details. Willows overhung the opposite bank, and weeds grew thick at the sides. Here and there water-lilies gleamed in the sun, and carp, tench, and dace swarmed in astonish-

ing multitudes. At one point was a little rickety landing-stage, alongside of which an old leaky punt, fastened to an iron ring, half floated in the water, half lay on the muddy ground with its head among the weeds. The children would follow the thread-like path along the water's edge ever so far, till at last it turned off sharply to the left and took them to all sorts of mysterious pits and greenhouses. Further on was a whole city of beehives, though the terrific swarms with their formidable humming used to frighten them back at first.

Altogether Gwenny and May were as delighted with this country life as children could be, and, as Hubert's knowledge of his little charges grew, he caught more and more of their spirit and buoyancy. The world seemed to him infinitely fresher, infinitely more vivid. He was conscious of emotional changes in himself—of a softening and a deepening, and a broadening—as his nature responded to the perfect surrender of these tiny souls, for whom the world rested on his shoulders. For he was the repository of all their thoughts, imaginings and secrets; his brain, they conceived, contained all the knowledge and wisdom in the universe, and they loved and trusted and worshipped him with all the richness and abandon that child-nature is capable of.

He was happy, indeed, that the world *should* rest upon his shoulders, and he rejoiced in their sense of security. And they, too, were so happy now, that it seemed impossible to make them more so. They had been taken and set down in a fairy-land, of an extent of which they had never dreamed. Its boundaries on all sides seemed to them an infinite distance off on those enchanted afternoons when Hubert drove them for miles through the surrounding landscapes. Though they had read about the country with accompanying vivid imaginings, their little suburban park had formed the raw material for embellishment, and they had never pictured to themselves anything so beautiful as this real country, with its soft, sweet, undulating expanses. They were, moreover, even on ordinary days, quite overwhelmed by the choice of delightful occupations, from feeding the

horse with sugar to watching Armstrong at his gardening, or even emulating his highly-interesting labours. Since to read or to play, to be here or there, were all equally joys, and all equally claiming them at once, they enjoyed life as with great gluttonous gulps. But when Hubert was at home their supreme happiness was to be near him, whether, indoors, they handed down or handed up books to him, or, out of doors, he criticised their gardening or joined them at cricket or catch-ball.

But they were not spoilt children. Hubert had told them very clearly that they would be expected to work and to take pains in the hours set apart for that purpose; so that they took their lessons with an immense solemnity, and were conscientious almost to a fault. Besides, they were pathetically anxious not to appear dunces in Hubert's eyes (than which they could have imagined no greater degradation), and they desired to show themselves deserving of all the nice things that were at their disposal.

Though they were necessarily being educated together by their common companionship with Hubert, still, in the formal work done with Miss Williams, Gwenny's lessons were kept separate from May's. It would have been humiliating to the elder sister to be put back to the lower stage of May's attainments, for though the latter considered herself fully Gwenny's equal in matters of the world—that is to say, matters outside of school-learning—she accepted Gwenny's supremacy at lessons as the natural order of things. Soon throwing aside their first timidity, both became fired by ambition to stride ahead rapidly, to perform prodigies of intellectuality. Yet even this did not lead to anything in the nature of rivalry. May's ambition, in fact, was a perfectly general emotion, and that she might eventually get in front of Gwenny was by far too mature an idea to occur to her. Such a state of affairs would, in fact, have appeared to her as abnormal as trees growing with their roots in the air. Yet an outsider might well have supposed that May would soon be taking the lead. For she had a quick eye that observed everything—and could not help observing everything. Achieving results with-

out much pondering, she had the appearance of scarcely thinking at all. With her bright way of dashing at things, she was able to get through every task without the least apparent effort. Gwenny on the other hand was perceptibly painstaking. She would calmly and carefully consider every point put to her, and never answer hastily. She was neater, too, than her sister, carefully ruling every line; whereas May had a tendency only to rule the important ones. Then, too, Gwenny excelled in ornamental capitals and head-lines, elaborately engrossed with inks of all colours. The outsider, nevertheless, would have proved a false prophet. Gwenny was perfectly able to maintain her lead. There was no real difference in solid ability between the two children, but only a rather striking one of temperament—and of method. Hubert's own judgment was that Gwenny was fundamentally the more serious character of the two, for she very obviously took life in a more staid and elderly fashion, and was far slower than her sister to lose herself in the excitement of their pastimes.

After they had gone to bed, Hubert, as a rule, would apply himself with zest to his books—unless he had brought business papers home with him. Such work, indeed, encroached frequently on his evening hours, yet he was able to gratify his passion for study and reading, always one of the intensest pleasures of his life. In his rummaging at his favourite book-shops, he was constantly unearthing mouldy little volumes of forgotten memoirs in worn calf bindings, and strange medleys of pseudo-philosophy, and queer old treatises on religion, and collections of mystic meditations. All these he would race through with feverish eagerness, placing, classifying, reflecting, and getting many a clear ray cast on the unending grotesquerie of human conviction and action. Despite his overflowing library, he knew and loved every individual book in it. Original work he did not attempt now, though he dreamingly planned out large treatises, and jotted down the fundamental thoughts that occurred to him.

On the hot summer nights he would read with the

tall French windows open, and, after a long spell, he would put down his book and stroll out into the garden. Those were sweet moments when he stood in the wonderful silence, broodingly aware of the vast landscape and the soft-rolling hills that lay beneath the darkness, of the immense life of past generations that had faded into that same silence, and of the two little girls slumbering deeply, worn out by their happy play on the lawn in the lengthening afternoon shadows.

VI

IT was not till the late autumn that Hubert heard again from Lady Wycliffe. He found a letter from her, on arriving at the Temple one morning, bulking amazingly among his other correspondence. Not that the letter itself was very enormous (though it covered six friendly pages); but the envelope was stuffed out with the proof-sheets of a new article of hers. She was rather shame-faced about having indulged in it, half apologetic for its existence and wholly apologetic for troubling him with it. She begged him not to laugh at her too much (he was unchivalrous enough to laugh notwithstanding); it was not like dram-drinking, she assured him, and the sort of thing was not going to grow on her. She went on to explain how it had come about—though all the time he knew very well the task had afforded her the keenest gratification, and that the result was now presented to him with all the pride with which a cat brings its mouse to be seen, and certainly not without a hope of surprising him into admiration of its cleverness. "The editor," she wrote, "seems to have been bent for some time on exploiting the talent of women with titles, and many have already yielded to his flattering solicitations—in most instances, I fear, with unfortunate results. Evidently the pen is a dangerous weapon for those unaccustomed to handle it. Somebody was needed to redeem the reputation of the order for intelligence—for the writers are, as a rule, far more intelligent than their effusions would lead one to suppose; and it was in the hope of being that somebody that I could not resist the editor's delightful invitation. This is the way he wrote to me. 'Of course,' he said, 'I could not suggest any-

thing in the way of money return that would in any sense represent the intrinsic value of a contribution from your ladyship's pen, or indicate our appreciation of it, but as a matter of routine we should like to send your ladyship by way of honorarium a cheque for twenty-five guineas.' " Lady Wycliffe was childishly delighted with the amount, which had deeply impressed her imagination. A professional writer, she remarked, must be able to earn quite a huge income, and she really had had no idea of it. She then proceeded to devote as much space again to a gossipy account of her own doings, and concluded with a sympathetic inquiry as to his own.

The article, Hubert was glad to find, was gracefully written—though not free from prejudice. He was thus able, without violence to his own conscience, to mete out a certain amount of praise. As he penned his reply he felt it growing under his hand. Her own friendly letter, following the long silence, had somehow done more to draw him to her than, perhaps, would have many letters in the interim. Her gentle nature, her beautiful sympathy seemed once more to cast a spell over him, and he even blamed himself for his previous doubts of her. And so he wrote as if to a friend of long standing, impelled by way of atonement to tell her briefly of his adoption of his orphaned nieces and of the present ordering of his life. He wound up by some reference to his reading of late, touching on the old memoirs which so delighted him because they always told so much more than their writers, embedded in the atmosphere of their own times, dreamed they were telling.

His letter was perfectly spontaneous throughout, and as he sealed it he recalled how she had said to him, "I should love your children." He could hear her softened voice, and the words touched him now even more than then. Perhaps, he thought wistfully, she might come to love even Gwenny and May; for were they not his children now?

Following close on Lady Wycliffe's letter came a message from Constance Powers. Since their last "annual tea" she had passed out of his mind even more than

usual, what with all the additional demands on his attention; but he had occasionally wondered how her affairs were progressing. The recognition of her writing brought her back to him vividly, with her fair hair, her large, wistful eyes, and her intelligent face. He remembered now all she had told him of her love affair, and of her "speculation in lodgings." As he broke open the envelope, he had the odd thought that she had never mentioned to him her sweetheart's surname, while he had never thought of asking for it; Willie had seemed so natural and all-sufficing an appellation for a sweetheart. This time, she explained, she was not asking him to an annual tea, but to something slightly more substantial. She purposed, in fact, going to four distinct kinds of sandwiches, to say nothing of fruit and wine and cakes. If he thought it extravagant of her, she could only plead that one didn't get married every day; and her wedding was to take place sooner than she had ever dreamed. The date had now been fixed for a fortnight ahead. She had, as she had told him, at first determined to keep the tale of her muddled affairs from Willie, but she had found it quite impossible to do so. At a certain intense and sympathetic moment all had slipped out, and he had chided her for keeping so great a burden for her own shoulders. He had claimed the right of at least sharing equally—since she would not consent to let him take all. And in order to seal the compact he had insisted on their marrying almost immediately. She feared, however, their respective families were irreconcilable. South Kensington and North Kensington each approved of the other's attitude, each secretly pitying the other in that such a respectable family should be afflicted with such a scapegrace; though, as neither avowed to a scapegrace, they were at daggers drawn when either's scapegrace was referred to as such.

And so now the scapegraces were taking matters into their own hands. On the marriage-day they would be receiving their few chosen friends at her old rooms in Pimlico (by kind permission of her tenant-successor),

and she looked forward to Hubert's assisting at their little Bohemian party.

Hubert was more than willing, for he found this little social comedy highly diverting; though he was sorry to feel that Constance would still be obliged to live a life of vicissitudes and sordid cares. He certainly liked and respected her, and he trusted that her new fund of faith and hope would take her on to more auspicious paths. She was really a clever girl, he believed, and if she only got her chance she ought to do something.

On the wedding afternoon Hubert arrived at the Pimlico address about five o'clock, which was as early as he could get away. The party, however, was then at its height, and he stepped into a packed room and a deafening hubbub of conversation. Immediately Constance came flitting across to him—she managed to "flit" in spite of the density—with large manifestations of joy at his coming. She wore a gown of white satin, with lilies in her hair and bosom.

"You may imagine how delighted I am," she exclaimed, shaking his hand with the nervous exuberance of a wife of three hours' standing. Then her cheeks suddenly flushed deeper. "Without your presence, I should have been somewhat of my mother's opinion about my marriage," she added in a lower tone.

"She looks on it as incomplete?" he hazarded, interpreting the compliment correctly, though passing away from it immediately.

"She looks on it as no real wedding at all. No bridesmaids, no crowds or pomp, no picturesque procession down the aisle, and no joyous organ-roll! Without such essential details a wedding must seem to her of doubtful legality."

Her face was suddenly overcast. He could see that there was bitterness in her words, and that she was suffering. He inquired whether all her family had kept away.

"They were strictly forbidden to come near me. My father's mind works in a strange way. I had begged that my sisters, at least, might be allowed to come, and

he wrote to say he could not possibly permit it, as that would make it appear that this marriage had his sanction, whereas it was his desire to emphasize his disapproval. On this one day, therefore, not one member of the family must come near me, though afterwards we might be as friendly as before, provided he saw nothing of my husband. He does not disown me, you see; he simply wishes to stand aloof absolutely from my marriage. Curious attitude, is it not? My sisters have no spirit, and father is an autocrat. But I must introduce you to my husband. That is he in the other room talking to the girl in mauve."

The crowd divided before her, and she led the way through the open folding-door, beyond which people were standing in groups round a large table thickly set out with good things—to the full tune of extravagance which she had pre-announced to him. Willie proved to be a big fellow, massively built, with red hair and heavily-freckled skin. His forehead was high and knobby, the hazel eyes almost level with his face, the nose well chiselled, the mouth large with thick lips, and the chin unexpectedly weak. Altogether Hubert did not like his expression, which struck him as that of a man always on his guard. But he did not attach much importance to this first feeling, especially as the man's face presently lit up with a pleasant smile that had a certain fascination about it.

"Mr. Barton—Mr. Ruthven!"

The two shook hands, exchanging a few banal remarks, while Constance smilingly put in a word or two in the anxious endeavour to promote their conversation. But somehow the two men seemed curiously out of sympathy, and Hubert, instead, found himself, after a moment or two, sipping coffee and talking to the girl in mauve. She was a Mrs. Rowland Grainger, the wife of a comedian, a little man with a monocle and an ex-cruciated expression, who was talking vigorously a few feet away. Mrs. Grainger, plump and fair in her mauve costume, had smiled graciously on Hubert, and had immediately launched out into a philosophic disquisition

on marriage and happiness. She talked and talked and talked, yet maintained her smile throughout. All Constance's friends, she said, were immensely pleased that she was now going to be so much happier than before. If married people weren't happy, she rattled on, it was their own fault. She herself had now been married nine years, and although she and her husband had begun without money, and had never had a pound to spare since, still they had had a very good time together. Her husband was really such a nice little man. True, he always said that if he hadn't fallen in love at twenty-one, he would have never been able to make up his mind at thirty. It was only now that he realized how great a piece of rashness their marriage had then been. But they took life as it came, and didn't allow themselves to be worried by things. They had been practically all over the world and had enjoyed themselves immensely; and everywhere they had met people as happy as themselves. She was always lecturing Constance about taking things too seriously—she had had the opportunity, for she and her husband were Constance's tenants.

All this time Hubert's eye was wandering round surveying the throng—the clean-shaven oldish-youngish men with their facial muscles all in tension, the women with the theatre unmistakably in their bones and attitudes. There was an air about the assembly that told of uncertain work and uncertain earnings, yet likewise of an unfathomable affection for the Bohemian atmosphere and the professional life that weighed well against all the chances and mischances.

At length Barton, observing that Hubert was restless, sought again to come into the conversation, and as, a moment later, some other man strolled over and ended by monopolizing Mrs. Grainger's garrulous attention, Hubert and Barton were again left to talk to each other. But, as before, the attempt was a dismal failure.

"It's awfully good of you to have come, you know," said Barton, who had a strangely soft voice and a somewhat mannered enunciation—almost that of a foreigner.

It was the third repetition of the same sentiment, for the third time evoked to fill an awkward pause. "Won't you have something to drink?" he went on desperately.

"Thanks," said Hubert, but he was grateful when Constance ultimately came to his rescue with the desire to introduce him to "a very pretty girl," by name Miss Queenie Wilson, who, however, proved to be more picturesque than pretty. She had large eyes, preternaturally bright and piercing, dark, visibly-powdered cheeks, a slim figure in a tight-fitting green dress, and billowy hair under a big Gainsborough hat. She was friendly and entertaining, and in turn introduced him to other picturesque friends of hers—Barbara Miles and Gertrude Wyoming, both as fair and pink and fluffy as she was dark and wavy. So that soon Hubert was feeling more in touch with all these friends of Constance, and an hour or so passed agreeably.

When the time came for him to depart, Barton wrung his hand with exuberant warmth, and Constance's eyes glistened at his farewell good wishes.

VII

THAT first doubtful impression of Constance's husband remained with Hubert. "Willie" was frankly a disappointment—his fascinating smile, beautiful teeth, and melodious voice notwithstanding. The same marked expression about the young man's eyes had struck Hubert disagreeably whenever he had been able to catch the face in repose, and there was left in his mind a grave suspicion that Constance had all along been idealizing an utterly unworthy person. His misgivings, of course, might be irrational. Indeed, it was a relief to think they were, and he hoped devoutly that the marriage was destined to be a happy one.

As the weeks went past he found that Constance did not fade from his consciousness in the same way as previously. Her figure literally haunted him, and he was always wondering what she was doing and how she was faring. At the same time she seemed to have receded further from him than ever before. He felt as if he had sustained some personal loss. And yet he retained his habitual conviction that she would turn up again with her usual unexpectedness. Perhaps, too, she would need his help some day.

Another marriage to which Hubert was shortly after invited (and one in connection with which his emotions were unreservedly enthusiastic) was that of Marvin the artist, who had been so kind to the children. The widower was about to lead to the altar an estimable lady who had sat to him once or twice, and who was as wealthy as she was amiable. Indeed, every feature of the affair radiated with such satisfactoriness that it really came perilously near to affording no points of interest,

but merely presenting an occasion for eliciting one's hearty good-will. Yet the wedding-day was destined to be one of the most memorable for Hubert; for Preston, who had only just returned from Wales, chose it as the occasion for conveying to him a most momentous announcement.

"The fact is," said Preston, after drawing Hubert into a quiet corner (the reception was being held at the bride's own house in Hans Place); "I've been thinking over things seriously, and I've had a sort of big inspiration. These revolutions in the lives of our friends are very disturbing. As long as they jog along in the same old grooves, we are hypnotized into being content to follow their example. Now Marvin's marriage is a big moment in his life, and my soul has been stirred into envy—not of the marriage, please understand, but of the big moment. My own life has been singularly barren of big moments and so I am introducing one by acting on the big inspiration I just mentioned. I have made up my mind at last to alter my mode of taking the noxious mixture of life. London is, in fact, intolerable now that the one righteous man has fled from it. I'm going to leave England, my dear fellow, and I wish I could take you with me."

"Far?" asked Hubert. The question implied at least ten others.

"For five years, I think," said Preston, singling out for reply another one of the ten. "That gives me one year per continent. I shall begin with the Far East, and follow my caprice. The Pacific archipelagoes, the Antarctic seas, the Rocky Mountains, Brazil, the heart of Africa, all entice me—you see my imagination has taken an immense flight. Of course I mean to be fairly happy the whole time, but the principal thing is—the big moment. I'm in the thick of it now (it extends up to my sailing) and I can't tell you how I'm enjoying it."

"I approve of your whim, but I shall miss you." Hubert's mode of expressing himself, was, as usual, strictly moderate, but he looked very, very solemn all the same.

"Don't call it a whim, Hubert. 'Inspiration' was my word. The odd bits of travelling I've indulged in at times have not been enough to fill in and colour life for me. But I ought not to talk of filling-in and colouring when I've never had even the faintest of outlines. What a splendid outline you have now! Plenty of work, beautiful kids, and beautiful ideals. I have only had my belief that this planet is the idiot asylum of the stellar system, and that a few sane people, unhappily for them, find themselves in it by accident. I've studied the lunatics within a certain radius of Charing Cross—now I want to get into touch with the others at first hand."

"I see! The rich variation of the lunacy tempts you."

"Exactly. You may, in fact, regard the world as a vast home for incurables, beautifully divided into wards in each of which the inmates are victims to the same set of delusions. After all there *is* some evidence of design in the world. But there is one symptom common to all the wards—a monstrous vanity! For each flaunts itself as immeasurably superior to all the others, and shows all the idiot's cunning in covering its idiocy up with beautiful phrases and gaudy flags. And how each pack keeps on snarling at every other pack! But the wards have really been fitted up with a humourous appropriateness, each having been decorated just to suit its own particular quarrelsome lot. Imagine, for instance, the worshippers of Bhudda without swamps, jungles, and elephants. But really, you're looking white as a ghost over my projected little study of humanity—or insanity. Let's come and get an ice."

"As you see I cannot dissimulate my grief, but an ice by all means."

They went down-stairs and stood amid a gaily chattering crowd, but, though bowing and smiling occasionally as various faces smiled at them, they did not interrupt their own conversation.

"There are, perhaps, some half-a-dozen people I shall shake hands with. For everybody else 'P.P.C.' cards must serve. No one is to see me off at the last moment

—I mean on board—not even you! But I want you to put me up for a couple of days, if I may come home with you at the week's end.”

“How good of you!”

“Thanks. I shall complete all arrangements in the next few days. Can't bother to clear out my rooms, of course, but the agents will keep on letting them furnished, and I dare say I shall want to pop back into them some day. Everything else is astonishingly easy. I just give my sister Marian a Power of Attorney, you see, and I've only to get enough outfit to start with.”

When Hubert gave himself up to his thoughts that same night he realized how deeply he had been shaken by his friend's announcement. Yet, to tell the truth, he had for a long time been expecting that Preston would, sooner or later, launch something sensational on him, and he recognized that altogether the present scheme was as good as anything his friend could have devised. Nay, on further reflection, he saw it was the only thing in life that could yield Preston any real satisfaction. He appreciated the idea with perfect sympathy. It was not an amateur pleasure tour his friend contemplated. Preston wished absolutely to lose himself in the various non-civilizations, to disappear for the whole five years, holding only the rarest communication with England.

Hubert now seemed to feel more clearly the nature of the contrast between himself and Preston. He believed in good works and in progress, whereas Preston loftily refused to identify himself with the world in any way. He understood his friend had turned away, sickened, from the spectacle, and had absolutely refused to be concerned in it. Men of his type were always labelled heartless cynics, whereas their very dissatisfaction with the world proved they were in reality idealists. It needed a kind heart to be distressed by brutal sights, and misanthropy had often its roots in love of mankind. Some such sentiment he had once, indeed, already expressed to Preston, but the latter had characteristically protested against being dragged up to Hubert's

saintly level. "No, no," he had exclaimed laughingly. "Let a man hug in peace the delusion that he's a villain!"

At the end of the week Preston joined Hubert at Pump Court and accompanied him down to Lynford.

VIII

PRESTON rose at six, and went for a long ramble through the fresh country.

"It's the easiest thing in the world to get up early," he declared at breakfast; "everywhere, in fact, save at Jermyn-street. My rooms must be bewitched."

May and Gwenny, who had their places at table even when there were visitors, pricked up their ears at this surmise of Preston's. But he met their astonished stare with the gravest of countenances.

"Yes, I'm quite sure they're bewitched," he resumed, as if the slightest further reflection had brought conviction. "Why, now I come to remember, only the other day I woke up in the middle of the night and caught them at it."

"Were there any fairies, please?" asked Gwenny.

"Not exactly," answered Preston. "Only the room seemed enormous, and the window looked like a shining patch a mile off, and everything was so still—I could hear my own heart beat. Then a voice seemed to ring in my ears: 'You think you're going to get up at six o'clock in the morning, at least, so you made up your mind when you undressed. But not until the bells toll their eleven strokes shall you be released—ha, ha, ha!' And when the morning came, I had to lie there spell-bound, unable to move hand or foot despite tremendous efforts. The feeling was simply terrible. At last eleven o'clock began to strike, and in a moment I recovered the use of my muscles and jumped out of bed. This sort of thing only happens at Jermyn-street. The demon with his mysterious voice has no power over me anywhere else. And for years now he has had me in his grip."

They shuddered.

"There's nothing to get alarmed about, little girls. The nasty fellow's much too fond of Jermyn-street to leave it, so there's scarcely any fear of his following me here. Besides, he hates the country."

"If I were you," said Gwenny, "I should never live there again."

"That's a good idea," said Preston.

"I'm sorry he hates the country," said May, with a distinct tinge of scepticism, though pale, in spite of herself, at her own daring; "because I should like to see him."

"I don't think you would," chimed in Hubert grimly.

"Really, I should," said May, put upon her mettle, and far too proud to give way.

"He has never actually showed himself to me, but he has branching horns and a hundred hideous clutching arms like a devil-fish, and he is covered all over with eyes, at least, so I've read on the best authority," said Preston.

May laughed incredulously, but she turned still paler.

"Very well then," said Preston. "When I get back to Jermyn-street, and wake up next Monday in the middle of the night, I shall make it a point to ask him to pay a visit down here just to oblige you."

She laughed with forced boisterousness, but was now as white as death.

All four spent a happy day together, driving in the morning, and lounging in the garden the whole long afternoon. Any very serious conversation between the two men seemed to be postponed in favour of interests all could share with equal pleasure. The children with great pride showed Preston their private garden-plots, relating the history of their favourite plants, and explaining their hopes as to the future career of some of the more promising ones. Becoming more and more the big playmate, Preston learnt all the mysteries and secrets of the various fairy territories into which they had already parcelled out the Ruthven dominions. In this part of the wood dwelt a good fairy, who was

always kind to children and helped them to remember their lessons; in that thicket lived an ogre, and for the life of them they never dared penetrate it. Here danced merry elves in the moonlight, and there lurked a witch who waited till everybody was asleep to go a-riding on her broom above the clouds. Beyond the high hedge that confined their garden on the left stretched poisonous marshes, in the midst of which an imprisoned king passed his years in a marble, though invisible, palace. The lawn in front of the house, with its central clump of bushes, was rather shunned by them, especially its further end. It was a sad region, haunted by invisible spirits, and it gave you an eerie feeling, sometimes an icy one. Whenever they had ventured to set foot on it they had retired almost immediately, trembling and with beating hearts. Then there were the hidden paths that led out in all sorts of unexpected ways, and wound about so delightfully amid the shrubbery and thickets. And all these regions, connections, and dependencies had formed the background for endless mystic and exciting dramas—sometimes with a dash of the grotesque and humourous thrown in—wherein figured knights, maidens, children, kings and queens, swans, and wizards.

Which was all very delightful and refreshing for friend Preston, who "got lost" after tea with his little chums for over two hours, even submitting to being blindfolded and floundering about helplessly, and searching for hidden objects guided by "hot," "cold," "freezing," "burning," and various other degrees of temperature.

May had been almost madly gay all day, but towards bed-time her animation was observed to dwindle, till at last she grew strangely silent. As this was so unusual for her (she, as a rule, growing more and more frolicsome as bed-time drew near, and savouring the last moments of "staying up" with poignant intensity), Hubert's attention was at once attracted. However, he said nothing just yet, being content to watch her. He fancied, too, she was pale, whereas after a long afternoon's play her face was usually one bright glow, and, as he quietly kept observing her, he saw her face take on

more and more a strange, uneasy expression. At length Martha Chapman appeared, inexorably bent on carrying off the children, but May seemed to linger reluctantly even after kissing the elders "good-night." Ultimately, with an effort, she managed to overcome this hesitation, and got as far as the door. But by now every drop of blood seemed to have left her face, and as Martha tried to take her hand she shrank back into the room and burst into tears.

Hubert and Preston stared wonderingly, whilst the housekeeper, misunderstanding the cause of all this emotion, stepped after her protestingly.

"But it's really past your time already, Miss May."

Again she attempted to take the child's hand, but now May uttered a piercing cry and huddled against the wall in terror.

Light broke on Preston just then. "Ah!" he exclaimed, considerably suppressing his desire to laugh. "It's my Jermyn-street demon she's thinking of."

"Jermyn-street is a long way off," said Hubert; "and the scoundrel is too comfortable there to think of leaving it."

"And, besides," added Preston, "it's possible I may have exaggerated the number of his eyes and arms."

May had already calmed down a little, and Martha began to dry the little face soothingly.

"But we can easily make sure about it," said Preston. "Any person who has expressed a wish for the demon to appear has only to retract it and to apologize for having called on him in vain to be for ever safe against his visits. Repeat these words after me, my dear, and then you need have no further fear."

"Yes," chimed in Hubert, "and you'll be able to sleep perfectly sound."

"I, May Winifred Ruthven," began Preston in a slow, solemn voice.

"I, May Winifred Ruthven," repeated May tearfully.

"Do hereby confess——"

"Do hereby confess——"

"That I have not the slightest desire——"

"That I have not the slightest desire——"

"To make the acquaintance of Mr. Preston's Jermyn-street demon."

But the humiliating part was to come, namely—

"That I never meant what I said this morning, and that I only said it out of brag and boast. I beg your pardon, Mr. Demon, and I promise not to brag and boast any more that I'm not afraid of you, because I'm really very much afraid of you. So please forgive me, and don't appear to me."

After which, tear-stained and shame-faced, she humbly went off to bed.

IX

ON the Monday morning, Preston, who was to travel back to town with Hubert, was down-stairs by eight o'clock. He found May already at work at her garden-plot, and, after a minute or two, she consented to stroll about with him in the half-hour before breakfast. She had turned red, and lowered her eyes on first catching sight of him, but he took care to have no remembrance of her humiliation of the evening before.

"You know I'm leaving you immediately after breakfast?"

"But you're coming back again before long."

"Would you like me to?"

"Yes, very much."

"And if I don't, will you be very sorry?"

"Yes, because I like to play with you better than with Francis," she explained. (Francis was the vicar's little boy who sometimes came to romp about the garden.)

"Then you like me the better of the two?"

"Yes," whispered May, blushing and hanging her head.

"Well, I'm ever so sorry, but I shan't be able to come back here for an awful long time," said Preston sadly.

"Truly?" asked May, astonished.

"Truly," replied Preston. "I am going to leave England in a day or two, and it is possible I may never return at all. Of course I'll try to come back some day, but you see I may get killed, as I'm going to live in all sorts of strange countries."

"I should like to go to strange countries," said May musingly.

"With me?"

"Yes, with you. But I want uncle to come, too."

"You don't mean to say you'd care about leaving your home here!"

"Only for a time. Perhaps uncle will take me when I'm older. But, of course, I should always like my home here best. Oh, I do hope you won't get killed."

"I'll try my hardest—because I want to come back and play with you again. But by then you'll have forgotten all about me!"

"Oh, no! I shall remember you—truly."

He shook his head. "You'll very soon be liking Francis instead of me."

"No. Francis never plays fair. He always peeps out on the sly when it's his turn to shut his eyes."

"Let me see—you're six now, little May?"

"I shall be seven next month," she proclaimed proudly.

"I shall not see you again for at least five years—just think, almost as long as you've been alive altogether."

May considered, wrinkling her brow prettily in the attempt to plumb the metaphysical depths of this comparison.

"Of course you don't remember when you first began to be alive," Preston resumed, coming to her assistance; "but you've felt alive now for a good long time, haven't you? Well, just think, it will be almost as long again before I return to England. You'll be nearly twelve, and quite grown up; a haughty young lady, in fact, who'll be giving herself airs, and who'll stare at me without recognizing me."

"No, indeed," said May indignantly.

"Then you *will* be thinking of me sometimes."

"Oh, yes," she promised.

"And you'll continue to like me?"

"Of course."

"Because, you know, I'm very jealous of Master Francis."

"I tell you I don't like him at all."

"Will you always like me?"

"Yes, always," she whispered shyly, hanging her head again.

"And I shall always like you," said Preston ; "better than any other little girl in the world. And to prove it, I have in my pocket a ring broken in halves. I'm going to give you one half, the other I shall keep myself. You must take great care of yours as long as you remember your promise to me. When I come back, I shall show you my half, and then we shall see whether you've forgotten or not."

He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, and brought out the two portions of a plain gold ring.

"It's all just as in a story-book," cried May, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Now take your half," said Preston, "and say: 'I promise faithfully to be your sweetheart true for always.'"

"I promise faithfully to be your sweetheart true for always," she breathed, red as a berry, and grasping her half tight.

"Remember, you mustn't breathe a word to anybody in the world. It's a secret only between us two."

"Yes, it's so much nicer to keep it a secret," she agreed.

"You'll kiss me now?" he asked.

She murmured her assent, and he stooped to bestow the caress, taking her face between his hands. Then hand-in-hand they made their way back to the house.

May loved her secret, but evidently she had yet to get accustomed to it, for it was interfering a good deal with her conversation. Preston, however, was perfectly at his ease, and spoke freely at breakfast of his coming adventures. Now and again his eye caught May's, and the swift look that passed between them was significant of mutual trust and assurance. And when the moment of final good-bye arrived, she broke down and sobbed ; a sorrow into which Gwenny, too, was caught up, so that when their big friend at last disappeared, the two little ladies were left lamenting.

X

PRESTON accompanied Hubert up to his very doorstep in Pump Court, and there the two men gripped hands for their last farewell. Preston's ship—he was beginning by a long voyage on a sailing vessel—was to be off with the tide on Tuesday at midnight, but they agreed there was no point in seeing each other again, the more especially as Preston would be busily occupied up to the very last moment. He had warned Hubert only to expect letters at long and irregular intervals, and correspondence for himself would have the best chance of reaching him if sent through his sister Marian, though some of it was fated to miss fire anyhow.

"There's one last thing I must mention," he said smilingly, as they still held hands. "My bankers will honour your signature at any time during my absence. I have given them an authentic one cut from a small cheque you once sent me."

"Oh, but I'm so prosperous now," Hubert assured him, "that I blush for shame to think of it."

"You have responsibilities now," said Preston, with such evident concern that Hubert could scarcely maintain his gravity. "And if the emergency arises, I shall think it a most unfriendly act if you do not immediately call on my bankers."

As his friend turned away, an intense sadness descended on Hubert. The parting was an accomplished fact!

Five years would go by—the earth would roll round the sun five times in indifference to the coming and going of men on its surface—and, if both were still

alive, they might grasp hands again. What an eternity life seemed, yet it slipped away like a shadow. With a quick plunge into the world of memories, he seemed to have lived and worked through an immense stretch of time. And yet he was esteemed comparatively young!

He had a line from Preston on board ship to say all was well, and that they were sailing with the tide. In imagination Hubert watched the vessel glide away into the night till at last its lights were lost beyond some strange distant horizon.

XI

ONE afternoon late in the same week Armstrong, as a special treat, had taken down the children to the station to meet Hubert, and they all drove back by an out-of-the-way circuitous route from which the scenery appeared in new aspects. A surprise awaited Hubert. In a narrow back lane an open brougham, with a fat coachman and a lean groom perched on the box, came rolling towards them, and as it passed his own modest equipage there was scarcely an inch to spare. From his comparatively high seat Hubert looked down on its single occupant, a dignified, white-haired lady, whose deep-set eyes shone out remarkably. Then he noticed, in the necessary moment of cautious slackening on both sides, that her finely-cut mouth had suddenly relaxed its firmness, and that she was smiling at him. A half-moment of hesitating blankness and then a flash of recognition. It was Lady Wycliffe. Simultaneously the word was given, and they drew up within twenty feet of each other. Hubert descended and walked back to Lady Wycliffe's carriage.

She greeted him winningly.

"Naturally you are astonished—much more so than I," she said; "but I have been looking forward for a long time to my stay in this neighbourhood. I was careful not to mention it when I wrote to you, as I wanted to pay you a surprise visit one of these days. I am having the most restful time with Mrs. Drummond—one of my oldest friends. It is not a house-party—we are quite alone. When she first suggested I should come to her I admit I was tempted, but the remembrance that you had set up your household gods in the very neigh-

bourhood, vanquished my last hesitation. However, it appears now the pleasure of coming uninvited is not to be mine. I take it for granted you will be kind-hearted enough to wish me to come all the same."

"I do wish it," he replied smilingly. "I arrive home somewhat late in the afternoon usually, so I suppose the end of the week will be best for catching me at the most flagrant worship of my Lares and Penates."

Her face lighted up with pleasure.

"Yes," she exclaimed eagerly; "and I shall be wanting to see all those lovely musty books you wrote about." Her enthusiasm, as usual, was almost girlish. "And those are the children, I suppose," she went on after a slight pause, as she looked back towards them. "May I not make their acquaintance now?"

He was about to bring them to her, but she insisted on leaving her carriage and walking over to them.

Gweny and May now no longer felt so much embarrassment at meeting a new grown-up person—especially when the person was so kind and gentle and sweet-mannered as this one. Still they were not entirely free from shyness, as was evident from their subdued answers to her friendly questions about their lessons and their games and the parts they liked best in the beautiful country round about. She ended by kissing them, telling them that she was coming to see them soon, and that she hoped they would like her when they knew her better.

"Such dear children!" she said, as Hubert saw her into her carriage again. "I wish I could help in some way," she went on with a vagueness out of which, nevertheless, her good-will shone as pure gold.

Then Hubert, speaking on impulse, begged her friendship for them. "As you may have supposed, there are but few people with whom I have any deeper relation—any real bond. The years have brought me many acquaintances, but beyond one or two men-friends there is nobody who really cares. My little girls would find themselves alone, face to face with the world, if any of the mischances of the world carried me away. The fear

weighs heavily on me. My dearest wish is that they might have a sympathetic friend; it would mean so much to them and to me."

"And to me," she added, with the kindest of smiles at this earnest solicitude of his. "I cannot thank you too much for your belief in me."

He spoke out his gratitude from his heart, but she cut him short laughingly. When at last he said he must not detain her just then, she would not hear of his leaving her yet, but kept him to talk to her for some minutes longer. She spoke of her husband, who was now yachting among the fiords with Lord William, and she narrated proudly how the doctor who had advised the cruise had been struck by the remarkable condition of Lord Wycliffe's heart, which was as good and sound as that of a young man of thirty. On Hubert's inquiring as to the welfare of the Hardynges he observed a change come over her face. There was a moment of distinct embarrassment on her part as if she had been taken unawares. But she was soon herself again, and he heard with amused surprise that there had been a storm in the Hardyng family, the daughter, Cissie, having been engaged secretly for more than a year before that fact became accidentally known to her parents. They had altogether disapproved of her choice, but the minx was as headstrong as she was sly—Lady Wycliffe had evidently been much disillusioned about poor Miss Hardyng since that evening on which she had enlarged so glowingly to Preston on the minx's virtues—and had carried her will against all opposition. Lady Wycliffe shook her head sadly, and gave a mild sigh in dismissal of the subject.

"I suppose you miss your friend very badly," she went on immediately. "We were all so sorry to hear we were to lose him for so long, or rather that we had lost him already; for I really think he treated us all shamefully—running off in that precipitate fashion. But, as my husband observed, one never knows what to expect next from these clever young men now-a-days. Ah, well, I suppose we must forgive him."

Hubert felt perceptibly happier during the remainder of the homeward drive, and so immersed was he in thought that he forgot to continue his expatiation on the landscape, interrupted by the sudden encounter. But that was of little consequence. For May, who had gone about puffed up with pride since Preston's departure, and who esteemed herself immeasurably in advance of Gwenny, was busy pondering on her big secret ; whilst Gwenny herself, being naturally addicted to meditation, had little difficulty in likewise occupying herself with her own reflections.

XII

As a matter of habit it was hard for Hubert ever to conceive of Constance except as overtaken by some fresh calamity ; and so, when in the following February (and some four months after her wedding) he received one of her sudden letters, his misgivings were so great that for a time he hesitated to open it.

He was soon to find that his instinct was once again only too amply justified. His blood grew hot as he read, and when he threw down the sheet he could scarcely see for the mist that swam before him. "Willie," the scape-grace darling of the North Kensington stronghold of respectability, had had to fly the country. In legal parlance he had "feloniously intermarried with Constance Powers, his wife, Cynthia Frances Barton being still alive." Cynthia, it had now come out, had married him quietly three years before at some out-of-the-way place in the North. They had disagreed very shortly after, and she had joined a theatrical company going out for a tour in South Africa. At the Cape she had followed her own caprices, till one day she was seized with the whim to return to her husband. Barton, who had thought himself well quit of her, and who attributed to her similar sentiments with regard to himself, had stupidly supposed that Cynthia—especially with her easy views of matrimony—would never bother him again. But she had turned up and made a terrific scene ; and Barton, mad with fright, had immediately disappeared. The scandal had got abroad, North Kensington and South Kensington were both paralyzed (though stonily unsympathetic), and Constance was left in the lurch without a husband and

without resources. She had somewhat recovered from the first rude shock, but she was still too prostrated to do anything but just lie dazed across her bed.

"I thought he looked a scoundrel!" exclaimed Hubert with conviction. "Poor Constance!" He remembered with a shudder all the wistful romantic emotion the affair had afforded her in its earlier stages.

She had written from an address near Eccleston Square, not far from her old rooms, and there Hubert hastened the very next afternoon. It was a street of narrow, two-storeyed houses with tiny doors standing stiff at the top of flights of steps. The winter air was raw and misty, night had already fallen, and the lamps twinkled dismally down the wet, bleak perspective. Hubert was glad when the door opened at last.

He was ushered up to the first floor and into a poky, gas-lit room with a big round table in the middle, a wheezy-looking piano across a corner, and a confused assemblage of rep-covered chairs, whatnots, shells, photographs, and paper fans everywhere else, to say nothing of the gilt-framed smudges and drab hangings—the effect of all of which was immediately to set his teeth on edge. Constance was sitting languidly by the fire.

She was visibly a wreck. Her face was deathly pale and her eyes were worn with weeping. She had scarcely the strength to rise to welcome him, though she tried to put a smiling face on her misery, jocularly referring to her unlucky star, half with laughter, half with tears. She was all but living on charity, he learnt; for, rather than go back to her father's home, she had preferred to accept the generous hospitality of a more prosperous girl-friend whose lodgings these were. Not that her father had extended any invitation to her, but she would not make the first overtures, and even in that case submission would have been attended by intolerable conditions. But for her friend, Queenie, she could scarcely have been able to pull through the present crisis. Queenie—didn't he remember the dark, slim girl in green, with the big Gainsborough hat?—was very fond of her, and had been ever so good to her. She would be home from rehearsal

soon, and if he had a little time to spare they might all have tea together.

He asked her where Barton was now, but she hadn't the least idea. All she was sure of was that he had left England. She was anxious not to use hard words about him, but there was no doubt he was utterly selfish and devoid of moral sense. She saw him in his true light now. Certainly she herself had deteriorated under his influence; her conscience had slumbered whilst she had assented to living quite beyond their means, so that so far from their joint efforts having resulted in the wiping out of her debts, all his fine sentiment and talk had come to nothing, and she was now in a worse financial plight than ever in her life. But this latter fact had, at last, lost its power to trouble her mind, for in her desperation she was callous to everything now; dominated only by a frenzied impatience with the physical weakness which hindered the one desire of her existence—work, work, work!

It was painful for Hubert to listen to her, but he let her talk almost without interruption, as he felt it was good for her to have a vent for her excitement: though once or twice, indeed, he had to try to calm her, her emotion for the moment becoming almost uncontrollable. Meanwhile, he had taken up mechanically a theatrical paper that happened to be lying on the table, and his fingers were idly turning the pages. Presently she directed his attention to the portrait of a woman at the top of one of the columns. "Cynthia!" she exclaimed, trembling and catching her breath hysterically.

Hubert looked at the portrait with interest. Cynthia was a very pretty girl, and she seemed to flaunt her smile at him from the printed page. He could imagine her kissing her finger-tips to a music-hall audience. The picture was accompanied by a short biography—most judiciously selected; and she was credited with having done brilliantly in South Africa.

"She is gifted, and will be at the top of the tree one day. But she is absolutely without a soul, and takes her experiences as they come. Nothing leaves any mark

on her. Her fancy for William was only a caprice, but I suppose she has done me a service."

Hubert, who was revolving in his mind how he might best induce Constance to permit him to be of help to her, was impelled to ask, apropos of her finances, what had become of her old rooms and her "speculation in lodgings."

"It was a bad speculation," she admitted ruefully. "I never got my rent from anybody. My upstairs tenants, Mr. and Mrs. Roland Grainger—you remember them?—found themselves unable to pay me a penny, but I liked them because they were always so happy and cheerful, and were constantly lecturing me for not taking life more easily. As they were always going to pay, and as, of course, I couldn't possibly ask such friends to leave, I ended by being the victim of their philosophy. Evidently I was never destined for a landlady. And poor Plantagenet who took my own rooms on the ground floor was down on his luck and couldn't pay either. You met him, too, once upon a time—he has a fine head of hair, and a weakness for the aristocracy."

"I recall the young man most distinctly," said Hubert smiling.

"And so in the end all my furniture was seized, and my friends were turned out into the cold. But they all seem to have taken it with their usual cheerfulness, and are quite as comfortably fixed up somewhere else."

The disaster that had overtaken her could scarcely have been more complete, Hubert reflected. Yet, as he was glad to see, she still looked forward to work, so could not have lost hope in the future. He certainly did not think that her whole life was to be looked upon as spoiled because of what had happened—terrible though that was. He saw the case clearly. She needed medical attention and proper nourishment, and a long rest under some more genial sky. Thus reinvigorated, she might take up her work again with renewed enthusiasm and even find enough in life to base her future happiness upon. Surely misfortune would not dog her always. He was on the point of setting before her these thoughts of his, and urging her to accept his help

to the not very formidable extent necessary, but he was prevented from proceeding further by the arrival, just then, of Miss Queenie Wilson from rehearsal.

Hubert recognized her at once, especially as she wore the same hat and the same green dress as on the last occasion of their meeting. Yet, divested of the Gainsborough hat, she seemed a homely creature enough, as unaffectedly plain as she was kind-hearted.

And though his intimate conversation with Constance had thus been interrupted, Hubert was at any rate pleased to notice how she had brightened at the entry of her friend. Miss Wilson, indeed, was a brisk, cheery person who gave him a hearty hand-shake, and whose voice seemed to ring life at once into the dull, drab room. She ordered tea without more ado, then announced she had good news.

"For me!" exclaimed Constance, opening her eyes wide.

"Yes, for you," Miss Wilson assured her, and the "good news" was presently joyously welcomed both by Hubert and Constance. Briefly, Miss Wilson was to take the piece now under rehearsal into the provinces during the summer for her London managers, and, as there was an excellent part that was the very thing for Constance, she had at once seized the opportunity of securing it for her. This certainly meant a considerable alleviation in Constance's present situation, though the intervening months were still to be provided for. And here Hubert would have liked to put forward his own suggestion for the solution of this remaining difficulty. But he felt it would not be right to say what he had in mind even before Miss Wilson.

As tea was brought just then, he consented to stay a little while longer, and he was gratified to see Constance's spirits mounting each moment. Indeed, he felt distinctly easier when, at last, he took his leave and descended the narrow stairway into the dismal evening.

Though tired, he wrote to her that same night to say that, as she had taken him so far into her confidence, and as they were very good friends, he thought she might let him know more exactly to whom she was

indebted, and to what extent—since he understood she was still being tormented by threats and demands. It would certainly conduce to her peace of mind if somebody were to see her creditors and persuade them to cease harassing her for the present. There ought really to be no difficulty in getting them to take a reasonable view of the situation. Also, in order that she might give herself a chance to get strong enough to undertake any work at all, or at least to be ready for her summer's engagement, it was necessary for her to go to some sunnier clime—he should recommend the Riviera himself—and, for that purpose, she was to use him as her banker for awhile. He phrased this desire of his rather peremptorily, so as to hypnotize her into unresisting obedience. Then, almost taking it for granted that she would adopt the suggestion, he went on in a very chatty way to recommend an hotel at which he had once stayed, describing it in humorous detail, and recalling some of the people who had assisted at *table d'hôte*. He also gave her a few impressions of the principality and gaily enjoined her not to be tempted by the tables to retrieve her position.

To his surprise her reply gave the most despairing note she had yet uttered. His goodness was overwhelming, but life was over, and everything, therefore, useless. Even Miss Wilson's good news had been an irony, for—she had been unable to bring herself to whisper it to him the day before—she was to become a mother! She had wanted work immediately so as to get a little money, but the offer for the summer was, under the circumstances, a mockery. Yesterday she had done her best to bear up in order not to sadden her two friends. Her pleasure at Miss Wilson's announcement was, in fact, a pure piece of acting, and to-day she was suffering from a terrible depression. Besides—though she did not know why—his letter had quite unnerved her and set her crying bitterly.

Hubert laughed grimly. The case was as thoroughly bad as it could be. Still he would not be discouraged; he fully meant to see that this life, with which he was

now in such intimate touch, was not to make shipwreck—in so far, at least, as he was able to influence it. The very depth of her despair made him only the more resolute. She needed cool, firm handling, and a little money would accomplish the rest. It would really be absurd if he could not manage to reason her into a more cheerful mood and make her see the perfectly obvious fact that there was a future before her.

But, before he could make a further descent upon her, she wrote to tell him that an offer of help had come from an unexpected quarter. Willie's father had called to see her, and she was now full of remorse for the unjust conception she had always had of him. True, he had put on a chill formal manner; nevertheless, she had felt he was really heart-broken. Although he had never welcomed or even recognized her as his daughter-in-law, he desired that she should not be left in want through his son's wicked folly, and he, therefore, was anxious to place at her disposal the—to her—fabulous sum of a thousand pounds. "I could not prevail upon myself to accept it there and then—I somehow did not feel it was right for me to take anything from him. But he said I could think the matter over, and that I should find the money available at any time. If you could spare a little time to come and see poor me again I should be so grateful. My own poor head is too weak to think, so I want you to think for me, and I shall accept your counsel unreservedly."

This distinctly pleasanter turn of events was really not surprising when Hubert came to think about it. The West Indian merchant was a respectable, right-minded man, who, though stiff, precise and despotic—so Hubert pictured him—was bound to act on considerations of humanity. Hubert never hesitated for a moment as to the desirability of Constance's accepting this offer. He would not allow himself to think there was anything unworthy in the idea of her receiving money from such a source. Indeed, he was highly elated at her wish to follow his guidance. Should she exhibit any sign of backsliding, he meant to be strong

with her to the point of highhandedness and override her last scruples.

She was still listless and physically weak when he saw her again, but she seemed to be ashamed of her previous utter collapse, and anxious to put herself in a better light before his eyes. He, therefore, found her more responsive to his optimistic view of the future than he had expected. Her remorse, too, for all her former prejudiced thoughts of Mr. Barton was now greater than ever.

"Of course he has his own views of life, and I ought not to have resented their being different from mine. Poor man! I could see how crushed he was in spite of all his gruffness. I believe at bottom he is just as nice as he can be. He said he had already called once before but missed me. But I never for a moment imagined it was he, especially as he never left his name."

Hubert was already aware that it was one of Constance's characteristics to be unable to speak adversely of anybody without having it on her mind and retracting on the first opportunity, with handsome appreciation into the bargain of the good side of the person she felt she had wronged. He was, therefore, cunningly able to utilize her remorse by pointing out, as a further argument for the acceptance of Mr. Barton's offer, that a refusal on her part would probably inflict a grievous hurt. It was not as if she were receiving mere vulgar compensation; the act was one of real humanity on the part of the father, and was wholly honourable to him. She must accept the money in the same spirit of goodwill as it was offered. And to preclude any possibility of her going back upon her present mood, he judged it best to dictate to her at once a letter for Mr. Barton, which he took care to bear away with him and post on his homeward way. But before he left he was amply satisfied, from the indications of her tone, manner, and conversation, that her mind was accustoming itself to the new outlook, and that she was on the high road to recovery—at least to the extent possible for a soul that has lived through so gross an experience.

Book III

The Wooer

I

THOUGH Mrs. Ruthven had spent one of her happy fortnights of high-handed speech and deed in her son's house, she was yet fated to return to her own home in a more perturbed state of mind than when she had left it. Immediate contact with Hubert's existence, over which, with advancing years, she had come to brood more and more, invariably excited her imagination, and the danger of his making an unsuitable marriage kept thrusting itself into agitating prominence. The world seemed full of horrible grimy webs for Hubert to flounder into.

Even that afternoon's visit of Miss Williams, who had brought over her friend, Madame Bartolozzi, for tea on the lawn, had made the danger seem vividly threatening. It annoyed her to think that, in the three years that had slipped away since Hubert had settled here, he had absolutely refrained from endeavouring to create for himself a social position in his own neighbourhood. The social system in which she had grown up was inbred in her very soul, and she could no more think outside of it than she could escape from the law of gravitation. Therefore her son's mode of life was almost inconceivable to her. She desired him to marry—though to marry well. In no eligible direction, so far as she was aware, was he considering the possibility. And the wisdom derived from so many decades of lynx-eyed watching of other people's affairs told her that a bachelor who avoids society may at any moment, by the awakening of a certain impulsive sentimentalism, find himself possessed of a wife—and one scandalously beneath him too!

But in all other respects the tea-party had been of the

pleasantest, and, as Mrs. Ruthven sat in the warm sunshine of the beautiful August afternoon—Hubert having gone to accompany the visitors some little distance on their stroll back to Lynford, and the children to take indoors and share a portfolio of music Miss Williams had brought for them—she was still conscious of the charm the two callers had exercised over her. Miss Williams was a very nice girl, indeed; what a pity she was the penniless daughter of a humble country doctor! But the elder woman, in particular, had quite fascinated her. There was something, in fact, about Madame Bartolozzi's personality that touched some odd romantic chord of her nature. Besides, Mrs. Ruthven rather enjoyed the luxury of an occasional admiration.

Just passing beyond middle age, Madame Bartolozzi was endowed with a pleasing distinction of feature, appropriate to her years; the worthy sequel to earlier beauty rather than its faded remnant. She had, too, a charming way with her, easy and gracious, yet never without a touch of dignity; and she talked in the sweetest and softest of voices with a becoming *souffçon* of the foreigner in her utterance.

Yet, as Mrs. Ruthven well knew—for she had heard from Hubert beforehand all about Madame Bartolozzi—this fascinating acquaintance of his was scarcely a foreigner. Though born, educated and married abroad, she was yet of English parentage. Early wedded and early a widow, she had found consolation for the loss of her husband—she had been bred a strict Catholic—in the cultivation of an extraordinary devoutness. And, possessed of high musical gifts, she had been able to support herself and to achieve some reputation both as a singer and a teacher, and in a minor degree as a composer. She was an old friend of the Williams (with whom she was staying at present), the mother having been one of her first pupils; and Miss Williams had first brought her to the house for the purpose of testing Gwenny's voice, which was excitingly promising.

The tea-things had not yet been removed from the little table at which Mrs. Ruthven had presided, on

behalf of her son, with such pride and satisfaction, and the empty basket-chairs stood about in humorous testimony to their recent sociable employment. Gwenny had sat close to Madame Bartolozzi, listening with all ears to the big people. And mixed with Mrs. Ruthven's present reflection as to the rapid way in which Gwenny had shot up the last year or two—completely outstripping her younger sister, in fact—was this new distrust created by the appearance on the scene of so brilliant and therefore dangerous a person. Not that she supposed that Madame Bartolozzi would set her own cap at Hubert; but a clever woman like that who was so obviously fond of Miss Williams must surely, she argued, have conceived the idea of bringing about, by every possible subtlety of manœuvring, so ideal a marriage for her young friend as the position naturally suggested. For the moment, indeed, Madame Bartolozzi loomed in Mrs. Ruthven's eyes as the embodied potentiality of skilful manœuvring. Hubert needed her maternal care—for how could the boy cope with so menacing a combination?

It was characteristic of Mrs. Ruthven that, however busy her mind with contemplation, the intensity of her inward vision interfered but little with the keenness of her outward vision; and at the moment when her reflections were at their gloomiest she did not fail to observe that the figure of a young woman had suddenly emerged from amid the pines at the bottom of the long lawn. This new visitor came forward a few steps, then halted abruptly on seeing Mrs. Ruthven. For an instant she hung back in evident embarrassment, then, with decision, came straight to meet Mrs. Ruthven's inquiring gaze, which softened before the gentility that gleamed from this apparent intruder.

"I am quite aware I have wandered on to private property," said the "simply dressed, ladylike and quite nice-looking person"—as Mrs. Ruthven was at that moment summing her up—in a tone whose quiet, half-humorous confidence impressed Hubert's mother still further; "but, as I happened to know the secret, I

thought I'd creep in through the back way in the hope of surprising somebody or other on the lawn. Unfortunately I have intruded on a stranger."

"I am sorry you did not know the house had changed occupants," said Mrs. Ruthven kindly, though mistaken in her conclusion.

"Oh, really," exclaimed the perplexed Constance Powers, reddening a little. "I had no idea. You must forgive me for disturbing you."

"Pray do not distress yourself in the least—there is no harm done," said Mrs. Ruthven suavely.

"It is very kind of you not to be annoyed," said Constance. "I suppose I had better go back as I came."

She smiled and bowed, receiving an affable "good-day" in return. There the little incident might have ended if May had not just then caught sight of her and hurried out to greet her. Constance, on the very point of turning away, saw the child appear on the verandah and stared in wonder, then presently laughed as it came upon her that she had been addressing Hubert's mother, who probably did not even know of her existence, and who certainly would not approve of so unconventional a proceeding as her visit here.

Mrs. Ruthven looked from one to the other, amazed at their evident acquaintanceship.

"I fear it is all a mistake," explained Constance. "I am in the neighbourhood for the first time for several months, and naturally I wished to see my little friends. You, I assume, are Mrs. Ruthven, and I am Miss Powers."

Her easy certainty of tone and manner was effective in allaying any renewed misgivings on Mrs. Ruthven's part.

"Miss Powers—Miss Powers?" she repeated in an effort to identify the name.

"Oh, I don't suppose you know my name," said Constance, whose hand May had now taken caressingly. "I am only an obscure one of your son's many acquaintances, but the little girls have taken a fancy to me and I

return their affection, so I try to see them when I can, and that is seldom indeed. And where is Gwenny, my dear?" she went on, addressing May.

"Gwen will be here soon, and so, I expect, will uncle. I'm so glad you've come to-day, because we're going to Dieppe for our holiday and you might easily have missed us."

"Pray be seated, Miss Powers," said Mrs. Ruthven, and, anxious to atone for her too hasty assumption, she hospitably went on to offer the visitor tea.

Soon they were joined by Gwenny, whose greeting to the visitor was not less enthusiastic than her sister's. But Mrs. Ruthven had again relapsed into thought. "Powers—Powers," she was muttering to herself.

"Pray excuse my question," she exclaimed, as her face suddenly lighted up in indication that her mental searching had been successful; "but used there not to be an old county family in Bedfordshire of the name of Powers. Perhaps you are a connection."

"My father's family, no doubt," said Constance, surprised at this accurate identification.

"I remember there was a John Powers who was thrown from his horse and killed when I was a girl. His two younger sons were in the navy, and the eldest then went up to London and obtained, as I was told, some civil appointment. The estate, you see, was heavily mortgaged and passed into other hands, and the family practically disappeared from the society of the neighbourhood."

"The eldest son was my father." Constance had to struggle to avoid a burst of merriment at the notion that her family's antecedents should be so well known to Hubert's mother.

"I was slightly acquainted with your father in those days. We danced together once or twice," went on Mrs. Ruthven, radiantly affable, for the Powers family had been a "really excellent" one.

Very soon Mrs. Ruthven was in the full flood of entertaining the visitor with reminiscences of those early times, and of the doings of the Powers in the county, though

at heart not quite free from perplexity as to the status of Constance in relation to her son's household, and as to how exactly her presence might be justified according to the nuances of social custom.

When Hubert returned he was amazed to the point of speechlessness to find Constance sipping tea and apparently on the best of terms with his mother. However, he shook hands with the visitor as if her presence were a matter of course, hoped she was well, and said it was very good of her to look 'them up—all with a calmness that left his mother as unenlightened as before; then, entering adroitly into the conversation, he manifested a well-bred interest in the county life amid which Mrs. Ruthven had passed her girlhood.

After a further short stay, punctiliously correct in point of duration, Constance rose to take her leave and brought the unfortunate surprise visit to an end as composedly as she had begun it by asking if it would be too far for the children to come to Yominster the next afternoon. She was leaving that place, she explained, the first thing on Tuesday morning, so would have no other opportunity of asking them to tea with her. Yominster was five miles away, and in the opposite direction from Lynford, so that Armstrong might easily drive them across and bring them back again. But Hubert had already arranged to take them up to London in the morning on a little shopping expedition in preparation for the trip to Dieppe on which they were to start in a few days, and now some discussion arose as to whether the children would not be too fatigued to undertake a second expedition in the afternoon. Gwenny and May were, however, quite indignant at the implied aspersion on their powers of endurance. The shopping was all to be done in one or two big places and could not occupy more than a couple of hours. As they were to be home for lunch, they would be able to have a good rest before going out again. And they pleaded so hard to be allowed to accept their invitation that even Mrs. Ruthven was won over to their side. So Constance scribbled her address for them on the back of one of

Hubert's cards, then, with a cheery smile for everybody, she sailed away.

"Who is this Miss Powers?" asked Mrs. Ruthven later, when the children had gone to their room.

"Why, mother," laughed Hubert; "your knowledge of her is already far more extensive than my own, since I have learnt so much from you this afternoon that I had no idea of before."

"Oh, I mean, of course," insisted his mother, "what is she doing hereabouts?"

"Enjoying the scenery, I suppose," said Hubert, who naturally imagined Constance was taking a short rest, choosing Yominster, as on several previous occasions, for the facility with which she could run over to see the children.

He turned the subject, but Mrs. Ruthven was not quite satisfied.

II

THE next morning Mrs. Ruthven kissed Hubert good-bye at the station and was borne off, leaving him to whatever fate his injudicious habit of life might bring upon him. She was getting on in years, she mournfully reflected, and had no longer the strength to war with circumstances. Heaven would witness that she had done her best to influence him, but it was not her fault that she had been afflicted with a son, whose obstinacy could only be matched by the crookedness of his notions. Thus Mrs. Ruthven beguiled the long homeward journey, at moments barely restraining her tears.

Hubert waited at the station till the children came to join him about half-an-hour later, and in good time for the London train. Their first rudely dispelled dream of the sea-side had since been realized more than once, but the present variation of the prospect gave it an added piquancy. The selection of Dieppe for their holiday had set them studying the map of France with remarkable zest, and they had often gazed at that particular dot on the Northern coast with its name sprawling out into the sea, wondering what the surrounding yellow piece of territory would be like in the reality. They thought of it all day, and dreamt of it all night, and the excitement of the coming trip mingled agreeably with the pleasure of their little expedition to town. They were through with their shopping even sooner than they had calculated, and they were able to catch an earlier train back to Lynford—and swifter to boot!—than the one fixed upon. But this was an advantage which neither Hubert nor the children appreciated, for all three were remarkably

hungry, and lunch had been ordered for an hour later than usual!

As Hubert had half anticipated, Constance had written to him anent her surprise-visit as soon as she had got back to Yominster. She explained that the company with which she was touring had taken that place *en route* just to fill in their time, though its possibilities were likely to be exhausted by a single performance. It was the first time in her life that her work had taken her there, and she had been looking forward to descending on him unexpectedly. But now she was very sorry indeed that she hadn't warned him beforehand. Hubert, however, did not at all approve of the tone of her letter, which somehow implied that he had reason to feel ashamed of counting her among his acquaintances, and that she felt she had been guilty of something unspeakable in having obtruded herself on him and his mother. Though she said she did not expect to see him again this time, and ended by wishing him the pleasantest of holidays, he resolved that, as it was necessary for him to administer the severest of lectures, he would run over to Yominster that very evening and perhaps call on her at the theatre.

In the afternoon the children were driven off to pay their visit, and were brought back safely, each bearing a little gift from Constance—Gwenny a tiny gold watch, and May a heart-shaped brooch. The desire to thank her for her thoughtfulness afforded Hubert an additional pretext for his meditated excursion.

So after dinner he strolled through the darkness to Yominster, and through the dead outskirts of the town into the central square, lighter, warmer, and noisier, where the theatre flared its appeal at the stolid slumbrous inhabitants. The performance was going on. He interviewed the man at the box-office, who directed him down a side alley to the rear of the building. The second act, he had learnt, was just about to finish, so that Constance was bound to be free for a few minutes anyway. The curtain fell precisely as he was stumbling over the irregular flagstones of the long alley, lighted

by the moon alone. He found a stable-like entry at last, and passed first into a sort of yard, smelling of hay and horses, then through a small doorway, brushing past a shabby, portly gentleman in a ruffled silk hat who was smoking a cigar on the threshold. Hubert found himself in a musty sort of space, crowded with carpentering devices and lighted by a huge naked jet of gas. He was about to mount a rather ladder-like stairway that rose steeply alongside the lime-washed wall, when he became aware that the portly gentleman was coming after him, so he turned to meet the challenge (delivered just then with rude emphasis) of this "manager behind," glad of the opportunity of getting new directions as to the intricacies amid which was to be found Constance's dressing-room. In a moment he was pursuing his way with renewed alacrity, and, after losing himself in spite of all instructions and almost floundering on to the stage itself, he at last, conscious of much dust and cobwebs, turned down an uninviting corridor at random and rapped speculatively at a primitive black door.

"Is that you?" said an unfamiliar feminine voice. "Come in, dear—how are you now?—do let me send the dresser for something."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Hubert, "but where shall I find Miss Powers?"

"First door round the corner," called the feminine voice with affable promptitude.

"Thanks," he called back. But presently he paused again—there were two first doors round the corner. The one on the right proved to be the owner of another female voice, equally unfamiliar.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Hubert again, "but where shall I find Miss Powers?"

"Oh, I beg *your* pardon," returned the voice. "Just opposite!"

So he rapped at the remaining door with a delightful sense of confidence. He heard Constance move, then in a moment the door opened and he saw her face light up with pleasure. She did not speak at once, and he noticed she was catching her breath excitedly. He stood smiling.

"And is this a special visit for me—for me?" she breathed rapturously.

"A brilliant guess!" he laughed. "You were so near, and I did not like the idea of your carrying away the mournful memory of yesterday's cup of tea. You drank it heroically—a full hour after it had been scalded!"

She bade him enter the tiny lime-washed room, bare of everything save the necessities of making-up and a couple of broken chairs. A rickety rusty gas-bracket supplied the illumination.

"But fancy coming all this distance when I've only five minutes free at most!" she exclaimed, offering him one of the chairs with the parenthetical assurance that it wasn't as decrepit as it looked. "Indeed, I sha'n't have another moment now till the end of the next act, when my work finishes for the evening."

"I took my chance," he explained. "It would have been well worth taking, if only for five minutes reward at the end."

She blushed, and thanked him for the compliment. Except for a touch or two, she was ready to go on just as she stood. She was a wicked young countess—a sham one—and in chic bonnet and smart Parisian jacket was just off to Marble Arch to keep her rendezvous with a millionaire banker whom she had utterly fascinated, and whom she was now certain of coaxing into marrying her. But the heroine, his daughter, duly coached and supplied with documents by the hero, was to meet her instead and call upon her to choose between exposure and leaving the country of her own accord. She explained to him this destiny of hers with a gay abandonment of spirit that he found charming.

"You are wondering why I seem so happy to-day," she said suddenly. "But I am so easily made happy—by the right things."

"Ah, the right things! They are usually very shy. But you seem to have wooed them successfully."

She laughed with girlish merriment. "I am all in a glow! Cannot you guess it was the pleasure of having the children with me to-day. I can't thank you enough

for letting them come—they are such sweet things and with such characters of their own, too. And what an enormous amount May has to say, and she does love saying it!"

"And you loved listening to her."

"For all too short a time," she half-sighed. "Gwenney, too, is a picture. She is so deliciously grave. She sang to me a little with the daintiest of voices. And then, hey presto! the two little princesses were whisked away, and I was left rubbing my eyes—as I shall be again presently."

"Which reminds me that I came with the idea of administering a lecture, but that had perhaps better be postponed till I can administer it properly."

"A lecture!" she exclaimed. "How delightful!—a pity I have to be going on in a moment." She began to busy herself before the mirror.

"Is that a dismissal?" he asked.

"Oh, please don't put it that way. A friendly good-night, let us call it."

"But may I not wait for you?" he suggested. "You say you will be free after this act, it will not be later than ten o'clock, and then the lecture might have a chance."

She willingly fell in with the idea, adding that perhaps he might join her at her supper—a salad and a bottle of claret. But she did not care to ask him to wait in such a stuffy little den, suggesting, instead, he might perhaps witness the act from the front of the house. The idea amused him for a moment, but somehow he felt he wanted to think, so he said he preferred to take a turn through the streets in the interim.

Then with a gay *au revoir* he stumbled down the primitive stairway, across the dim stable-yard, and back again through the long, dark alley, only realizing he had traversed them as he emerged into the warmer light of the square. There were groups of people dotted about it, young lads loafing in the evening air, and men and women gossiping amid the smoke and odour of clay pipes. They looked at him as he strolled past, and he wondered vaguely why. Then, as he turned a corner,

where a public-house with nickel reflectors cast a beery glare across a narrow, crooked street, his thoughts went sharply back to his own concerns.

No sensational events had broken the flow of these last years. In his profession he had prospered continuously, but he had been kept to his work pretty closely and had had time for few pleasures—as men reckon pleasures. Odd hours of book-hunting when he could spare them in town, a further hour or two amid his tomes at night, and a regular constitutional or canter, exhausted all the diversion he claimed for himself. He still continued to plan out ambitious works and to make many notes for them, but his scholarship and his tenets had found no further expression in print.

Though he was now on nodding terms with many of his neighbours (for his figure had come to be well known to everybody) and had even taken part in one or two matters of public moment, he had not otherwise joined in the life of the district. Nevertheless, people liked him immensely, and he had no idea of the respect and estimation in which he was held. As to the comparative seclusion in which he lived, that was ultimately accepted on the ground that a man addicted to much study could not be expected to take kindly to the usual round of visiting. He was, however, always ready to exchange a cordial word with the larger and smaller gentry, as well as with the tradespeople and the folk about the countryside, invariably amused at the sharpness with which the population fell into these divisions.

But in himself he was conscious of having changed to a certain extent. His manner had stiffened a little; he had a tendency to be a trifle formal even with intimates. And at the same time his habit of reserve had grown upon him. All of which was, perhaps, due to the break-up of his own particular little group of associates, what with Preston away and Marvin married and himself more or less out of touch with various other men with whom he had occasionally been wont to foregather.

As to Preston, he did not know even approximately in what region that adventurer was rolling about just

then, nor, apparently, did anybody else. It was almost a year since Hubert had last heard from him. But that counted for nothing. For few, indeed, were the letters that Hubert himself had troubled sister Marian to forward. The serenity of his own existence offered little for chronicling ; and, even had Preston omitted to give fair warning beforehand, Hubert would have sympathized with *his* neglect of correspondence.

Nor had his friendship with Lady Wycliffe languished and withered away, though there were necessarily long intervals between their meetings, which generally took place at her own house. But intimate as this friendship was in one sense, it was characterized, in form at least, by a marked degree of stateliness, almost of ceremoniousness, which was suited to a certain aspect of both their characters. It was in fine a little too lofty and spiritual for the needs of every-day life, and afforded no corrective for Hubert's present tendencies.

But with Constance Powers he was on quite a different footing. Ever since the time of her great trouble his influence over her had been complete. She looked up to him with a naïve trust that touched him, and she would have obeyed his least suggestion unquestioningly. And yet, despite this self-effacement before his superior strength and wisdom, she managed to retain over him an ascendancy of her own. She was mistress of his attention, knew that, at her bidding, all else would be set aside, and that her concerns would immediately be his.

Ever since he had hastened to the rescue on that dark winter day, he had assumed a sort of responsibility for her well-being which had at length become an emotional pleasure. Even after the reduction of her financial difficulties, she had been fated to sustain the worst shock of all. Her child had been born dead and many months had gone by before she had been sufficiently convalescent to take up her profession again. But he had taken care never really to lose touch with her—though, of course, he could not help losing sight of her most of the time. And he had ample reason to congratulate himself on the

result of his influence ; for had she not admitted again and again that she now found life well worth living !

Three whole years of such association had thrust back to infinity the time when they had not known each other at all, even the period of their first casual acquaintance-ship. He was aware that she had entered deeply into his consciousness, that, in fact, she was the only woman in the world whose life was a vivid reality to him, whereas all other women seemed to have receded so far from him that they were scarcely more than a multitude of shadows. And so, thinking frequently of late over the respective positions of Constance and himself amid their fellow creatures, he could not avoid the idea of a possible closer association between them.

Unattached to any social clique, he felt perfectly free to act according to his own judgment and to ignore conventional criticism. Even apart from the question of choice, there were the strongest reasons why he should marry now. The children were growing up rapidly and he felt he ought not to undertake any longer the sole responsibility for them. And therefore, having to choose, he preferred to seize the opportunity that suggested itself to him spontaneously.

All things considered, a marriage with Constance seemed to have much to recommend it. In personality Constance was just such a partner as he might long have searched for, a woman of heart and brain between whom and himself no barriers existed. Of course the affair would be a somewhat deliberate one on both sides, he told himself, but it was foolish to look for romance. If his feeling towards her was not that of a love-sick school-boy, he was yet conscious of having been touched in some deeper way, and there were aspects of such a union that might well vie with the purely romantic.

They respected and believed in each other, they had each suffered, they were each in a way solitary. It was true the experiences she had borne had been of a more brutal kind than his, but what she had lost thereby in girlish free spirit she had gained, he argued, in character and depth of feeling. She was still young, and to the

more serious and admirable side of womanhood she brought grace and freshness enough to symbolize its æsthetic side. Her quick delight in trifles, the touch of rapture and fresh enthusiasm that had survived all her sorrows, pleased him greatly, and he was already conscious as of a new brightness in his home. Above all, not only were the children attached to her, but she in return displayed an affection for them not inferior to his own.

The idea had been in his mind for some time now. She suited him absolutely, and he would not allow that one essential fact to be obscured by considerations in which he knew only too well the average person would have indulged. She no fit wife for him because she had been so cruelly imposed upon! The thought of what she had endured roused all the chivalry in him, and his heart went out to her in infinite pity. It seemed as if no tenderness could atone for her past suffering!

If Constance would consent to join her life with his, he felt there would be every prospect of happiness in the union.

III

As Hubert was about to rap again, the door of the dressing-room flew wide open and Constance stood before him smiling and merry. She was ready dressed to go home, so they started off immediately. Once they had cleared the square, she led the way briskly through the silent old streets, talking gaily the while and unaffectedly delighted at this unhopèd-for companionship.

She turned at last down a narrow lane paved with cobble-stones, and stopped before a little gabled house, with a quaint bay window that projected overhead from its upper storey. The door opened with a latch, and they passed along the corridor into a little sitting-room, stuffy with the smell of the lamp which was burning badly. The table was ready set out for her supper, and the salad of which she had spoken lay conspicuously in a dish of water. The landlady appeared just then and Constance bade her put another cover. She was a curious woman, thick-set, with strange dark, heavy features, brilliant black eyes, and jet-black hair hanging in curls. Her ears were weighted down with large gold rings. The daughter of some ancient corsair, one might have imagined; and Hubert was pleased with her as an incident in the evening's little adventure.

"I must proceed now with the task of drying the salad," said Constance when they were alone again. "Drying salads, in fact, seems, at least to me, to be part of the professional life. . . . Strictly speaking," she resumed, as she drained off the water from the dish into the nearest flower-pot; "my account of the menu was not quite accurate. In addition to this *salad à la bath* there's a cold chump chop, and a big tomato—both to

be scrupulously halved between us—and finally there are pears and black coffee."

"A very charming menu," was his comment; "but I dined late, and you—are dining later."

"Oh, please don't spoil my evening," she protested, busily separating the crisp leaves of the salad. "You accept my invitation and then rule out all the fun."

"The coffee—and the salad, of course,—I have already accepted. The chump chop and the big tomato were not in the bargain, and, seriously—you are a goose. You are to consume both halves—scrupulously!"

"Ought I?" she asked doubtfully, as if in perplexity over the most important of issues.

It was a touch of unconscious coquetry, and he allowed himself to be charmed by it.

So she ate her supper, whilst he administered the lecture postponed from before, and called upon her severely to explain how she had to come to write to him in that self-depreciatory fashion.

The light died out of her face, and he saw she was taking him very seriously. "I wrote as I felt," she said simply.

However, he continued his protest. Her absurd attitude only showed that she did not really believe in the absoluteness of his friendship; she had certainly hurt him by her implication that it was a thing he might well be ashamed of.

"I was imagining your lecture was going to be all fun," she complained almost tearfully. "I did not expect any seriousness this evening—I wanted us both just to be happy and light-hearted. It does one so much good to laugh sometimes, and, as a rule, there isn't very much to be merry about when one is alone—as I always am. But since you are bent on chopping logic and getting me into a corner, I am going to turn at bay at once. Well then, I did not wish to imply that you ought to be ashamed of knowing me, but rather that I ought not to take advantage of the fact that you were not—since, in the eyes of the world, we are scarcely on an equality."

"You are extremely subtle," he exclaimed.

"I am only trying to express my exact feeling at the time I wrote."

"Oh, I'm sorry I misunderstood," said Hubert, amused at her bristling resistance against his attack. "Really, I don't think I can resist half the chump chop after all!" he added laughingly.

She caught up the note at once, joining in the laugh as merrily as ever. "Too late!"

"So typical of life," he sighed with mock dolefulness. "The irony of things pursues us even here."

"The irony of things! I don't mind that, so long as it takes no worse form than my gobbling up your share."

"Naturally! You can afford to laugh at that."

"Oh, well, I have laughed when it has taken worse forms—and they were very much worse in the days when I was still yearning for a fortune."

"I remember. I was the confidant of your sorrows even in those early days. I must admit you used to treat fate with dreadful levity."

"That is to say: when I couldn't get things to smile at me, I used to find consolation in smiling at them."

"An admirable philosophy!"

"It is said," she went on, "that fools may make fortunes but that only wise people can keep them. From my own experiences I am inclined to count myself—illogically, of course—among the wisest of the wise."

"Ah, you are still yearning for your fortune!"

"Whatever the gods send me I am satisfied with. All the same a fortune would be an ecstasy."

"You'd run a theatre?"

"No, I should run away from it. I have had enough of theatres, and I long since discovered I am not a genius. I went on the stage, mainly because I wished for a life of my own, but I confess I was conceited and had the silliest inflated notions of what I was likely to do. It makes me shudder to think what an insufferable little brute I must have been! Of course there is nothing else for me now but to struggle on in the

profession. I am wedded to the foot-lights, and so must tolerate them cheerfully, even though my first ardent affection has entirely evaporated. . . . And now I must measure out the coffee," she laughed, jumping up from the table. "You see," she explained; "I carry my precious stores about with me in my trunks, and dole them out as needed. Please to pull that bell."

When the landlady had finally served the coffee and retired again, Hubert thought he might as well seize the opportunity and broach his big idea. It would be nice to have the matter settled before taking the children on their holiday. But he was surprised to find it wasn't so easy to begin as he had supposed. Many introductory sentences, all equally good, occurred to him with an unfortunate simultaneity, so that they got tangled together and stuck in his throat. This rather annoyed him. He coughed frowningly.

"Isn't my coffee good?" she inquired anxiously.

"It's first rate," he assured her; "only I feel as if some had gone down the wrong way."

"It's a miracle it wasn't spoiled. Landladies generally manage to give it a fishy flavour."

"By way of slipping in a suggestion of an extra course?"

"Yes, I suppose my frugality *does* invite sarcasm. Look how soon we have arrived at this advanced item of the menu."

He glanced at his watch. "Not so very soon," he exclaimed in genuine surprise. "Time has been indulging in his usual vice."

"You will be returning on foot?"

"Through the darkness. I like it. It stimulates my imagination. But I must not go without saying what I came specially to say."

"More lecture!" She made a wry face. "I thought you had forgotten all about that by now and wouldn't finish. Because your lecture to-night was not as entertaining as usual."

"The lecture was only incidental. I hope the main thing will prove less disagreeable to you than the

expression on your face seems to augur." He sipped his coffee again, and leaned forward with one elbow on the table. "The expression changes visibly," he laughed. "Now it is one of intense expectancy, and altogether not unencouraging. Well, then, I wish to express an opinion and a preference."

"An opinion and a preference!" she echoed.

"Now the expression is one of mystification."

"Egotistic mystification," she corrected; "for I am assuming that they concern me personally."

"To a large extent. Since you always permit me to talk freely of your intimate affairs—the opinion is that you ought to give up the stage, and marry!"

"Excellent idea," she admitted; "but—well, you forget I am not exactly a marriageable person."

"A morbid notion—inconceivably perverse! The sooner you awake to the sense of your proper worth, the better. Why, my preference is that you should do me the honour of choosing me as your husband."

She looked at him, first white and then suddenly deep red. She was trembling visibly.

"This is worse than folly!" she exclaimed gaspingly. "It is downright insanity."

"You are hard on me," he suggested.

"Not harder than you deserve."

"But why this sudden aspersion of my intelligence? Isn't it rather a violent change from your usual attitude?"

"You have been so much my friend," she replied more gently, "that I wish to be your friend now. For your own sake, I cannot permit you to perpetrate anything so utterly ill-considered as to marry me. Marry *me*!" She broke into laughter that rang with scorn and bitterness.

"What am I asking you," he protested, "but to help to make me happier than I have ever been and to encourage the hope that I, too, may try to smooth things a little for you? I want to make up to you for all you have suffered."

She appeared suddenly to be stricken with remorse.

"Forgive my roughness," she begged almost in tears.

"It makes my heart bleed to give you the slightest pain. But nothing could have been further from my thoughts than this possibility. You have known me so many years, and I have always looked upon you, scarcely as a man at all, but rather as a special being, valuing it as a privilege that you should occasionally come out of your sphere into mine. I have always been grateful for such crumbs of your time as you could bestow on me—such moments were my one certainty of brightness amid my wretchedness. I used to tell myself that I was saving you up, so that, when you did appear, I might draw new life and courage from your presence. That is the way I always thought of you, but, if I had imagined that this friendship was likely to lead to any such—such—wish on your part as you have expressed to-night, I should have considered it my duty to cut it short unflinchingly. But it has gone on so long, and I thought it was absolutely safe. Now I fear it is spoiled for good and always."

"Oh, I don't mind that at all," he returned, with a not very successful attempt at cheerfulness, "so long as the new arrangement takes its place."

"But since that cannot be, you have hit me hard—speaking, that is, from my own selfish point of view. . . . Which sounds very terrible," she added quickly. "But when one uses metaphors, reproaches and accusations seem to come up unintentionally."

"Come now," he urged, seeing her first excitement had spent itself; "why should we not both be perfectly reasonable? We are two sensible people, possessed of excellent understandings, very good friends moreover, and a certain question arises between us affecting the lives of us both. Well, why should we not tackle it, and see what, with mutual good-will and in all sincerity, we can make of it. Let me begin by speaking for myself. That I should now wish to marry ought not to surprise you. I have been settled with the children for some time now, and, for the first time in my life, though I am perilously near forty, I am sufficiently prosperous not to feel any real anxiety about the future. I have a fine practice

now, and I shall do even better. But there were many long years of depression and useless effort, which have certainly left their mark on me. After my happy experience with the children, I have at last come to believe that there is nothing better in life than to follow out the common human destiny. I am selfish enough to wish to make my life complete, and therefore marriage is the one outlook for me. That being so, it seems to me the most natural thing in the world that I should wish to marry *you*."

"Believe me, I appreciate the compliment," she returned without a moment's hesitation; "but please remember all I have already said. You must admit you have entirely ignored it, yet it still holds good as a reply to all you have just been saying. But, over and above that, let me advise you as a friend who has your ultimate happiness at heart, and who just now is the more clear-headed of the two (as you were when my affairs were in question), let me even implore you to find a wife in a suitable station of life—a woman who will do credit to you and your position."

"And when precisely I seek to follow this advice you refuse to help me!"

"No more compliments, please, but, as you just now suggested, let us be perfectly reasonable. I quite agree that you should marry, and no one will rejoice more than I in your happiness. Now just consider, cannot you put me out of the question altogether? Ideas are, of course, obstinate, but I am sure that, with a little effort, you will be able to get rid of the one that is bothering you or rather both of us. Then you'll be able to do justice to the needs of the case. You know, really, you aren't a bit in love with me!"

"Oh, you know I have a great affection for you," he assured her, staring hard into his coffee-cup. Then, looking up and meeting her gaze squarely: "I respect you and believe in you, and it is my sincere conviction that our union would be as successful as any union possibly could be. Of course I have left marriage fairly late, as people usually reckon, and, at my age it is naturally

a more deliberate business than, say, at twenty. Why should I not be frank with a person of such good sense as yourself? You doubtless realize that to a mature man love is not the same airy delightful emotion as it is to sentimental boyhood. It is an emotion, more complex in many ways and more deeply rooted, felt moreover in relation to one's whole experience of life; on the other hand it is certainly less impulsive, less of dreamland. There is no reason, indeed, why I should make any pretence to the contrary—considering the terms on which we have always been. We both know life, and, with a deep regard as the basis of our companionship, we may safely defy disillusion."

She had followed him eagerly, but she had now regained control of herself, and her expression was inscrutable. She was ready with her reply at once.

"Your argument is all on my side," she declared with a calm deliberateness, as if she were conscious of holding victory in her palm. "It is just because of the maturity of your sentiment that you ought to find it the less difficult to put me out of your mind. Your ideas are absolutely first-rate, but only try to let them centre round some nice woman who is really suitable (and not so merely as the result of your chivalrous sentiment)—and you will, perhaps, be surprised how well they will harmonize with the new centre. You see, I am falling in with your suggestion, and discussing the case in quite cold blood, giving you my thoughts as they occur to me."

"There is no other woman for me," he persisted. "I cannot marry somebody of whom I know nothing, or whom I know with a mere false superficiality. I should have to begin to search all over again, and, in any case, to take all sorts of risks. Then, as you know, I detest frequenting the usual conventionally ordered circles, under the usual conditions. I shrink away from that with a shudder. Life has brought us together. I say we are suited to each other. With you I am free to live a noble, simple life!"

"Perhaps you are unjust to the conventionally ordered

circles," she suggested. "They are open to you, and—there are good women everywhere."

"Ah,—good women are not exactly labelled," he exclaimed. "Besides, my personal ideal is the good woman who is her own mistress and who knows and has faced the realities of life. I have not the least desire to get entangled in the comfortably ordered web in which your supposed suitable person has her being—I might flounder about a good deal too much for my liking. I have, somehow, never felt quite easy in my mind that things are righteously ordered in this world, and, in the nice soft warm web, there is so much smug self-satisfaction which one comes into collision with the moment one sets foot within it. . . . I have never told you," he continued smilingly after an almost imperceptible pause—they had by now settled down on an easy conversational footing—"but I have already had an experience of it."

She looked very interested, taking up the hint sharply.

"You once had a disappointment!"

"Well, naturally," he smiled; "one doesn't live to my age without passing through the various stages ordained to the species. Even if I were silent on the point, you would, of course, take some such thing for granted, but there is no reason why I should be silent. Yes, I did not get through my youth without falling in love—head over heels, madly! She was a daughter of the Philistines, a graceful creature with large blue eyes, and wonderful hair, and soft shimmering-dresses. I see now that the atmosphere in which she lived would have stifled me, and that my punishment was a blessing in disguise. She was not rich, but she had lived in the conventional and correct luxury. My own prospects at the time were none of the brightest, but I was too impulsive to conquer the infatuation, though it does seem absurd now to think that I should have got as much suffering out of the affair as out of the deepest sorrows of my life."

"And how did it all end?" asked Constance breathlessly.

"At first the girl herself was distinctly more than

friendly, always soft and fair and smiling! Those were my dancing days, and I used to meet her quite frequently. However, since in the conventionally regulated web, all wooing is virtually carried on in public, her family got to know of the danger, and then—hey, presto!—with a prestidigitator's address, she became cold as marble. How vividly I remember it all! But I had lost my head and would not give up. I insisted on an appointment, which she evaded, and I found her father instead—a Philistine through and through. Socially I was beneath them, and my poverty was not in my favour. I don't say the man wasn't right enough in some ways, but the family had ambitions, was looking socially upwards, and the girl, on account of her beauty, was being reserved for a higher possibility—I had almost said for a higher bidder. Anyway, the man was needlessly insolent. I suffered terribly for months afterwards."

"Poor Hubert," said Constance softly. There were tears in her eyes. "And so you were *really* in love then?"

He seemed to brood a moment, as if to recover the long-lost emotion. She watched him closely.

"Yes, it was fine and full of poesy," he said slowly, with absent eyes. "To think of it brings back the odour of violets."

"Poor Hubert," she breathed again.

He got up, drew a long breath, and made a stride or two about the little room.

"But the memory of the way the thing ended is only humiliating!" he presently resumed in a matter-of-fact tone. There was the flicker of a smile on his face, which grew and grew until he broke into laughter altogether.

"It seems to amuse you all the same," she observed.

"You perhaps slightly misunderstand my remark," he explained. "What humiliates me is to have taken part in so absolutely commonplace a story. Not even an elopement and pursuit, only a bald, blunt, prosaic rejection."

"Still, your amusement to-day is pure gain."

"Yes, but how am I to apply that philosophy of yours to my rejection now?"

She looked distressed. "I am sorry," she said; "I wish I could help you."

"Ah—you can!" he said eagerly.

"Please—don't insist further. You hurt me."

He took up his hat. "Well, the hours are flying and I must not stay."

She gave him her hand and they said good-night.

"I will find my way out," he said as she moved to accompany him. Then, turning in the doorway—

"No word of good cheer to take with me to Dieppe?" he threw out on the last chance.

"No, Hubert, I refuse you," she said gently.

"But you love the children. If you cannot come for my sake, come for theirs."

The unexpectedness of the shot found her at a disadvantage, but she recovered herself immediately.

"I would rather never see them again. Please understand I refuse you absolutely."

Her words were steady and straight. They seemed to sink into him and stir him in some way.

"We shall see," he launched back defiantly.

IV

AS Hubert walked home in the fine summer night he hummed and whistled quite blithely. He was not in the least disconcerted by his rebuff. Constance was going to marry him—of that he felt quite certain.

She had made very clear her ostensible reason for refusing him; but it would be most unchivalrous, even unmanly, to retire before an opposition based on such absurd considerations—however he might admire her unselfish regard for what she conceived to be his interests. Want of inclination on her own part she had not alleged—much less any positive distaste for the idea; she was merely convinced she would be doing him a wrong by entertaining it.

Well, he should simply insist on an immediate engagement between them, and refuse to argue about it. He would no longer put it as a request; she must submit to the pressure of his will. All further resistance would be waste of force. Ridiculous that she should esteem herself so meanly as a marriageable quantity!

Hubert, in fact, began to consider himself as good as married. And he meant her to realize that she was as good as married. However, as he could not run after her till his return from Dieppe, he decided for the present to resort to a bombardment of letters. The sooner she understood she already *was* an indissoluble part of his life, the sooner—she could supersede Martha Chapman!

Fortunately she had enclosed in her last letter to him a note of the itinerary of the theatrical company with which she was playing, so that, as soon as he and the children were settled in a suitable *pension*, he was able

to begin his campaign at once. And, indeed, he set about prosecuting it with the greatest vigour, taking up his pen each evening after the children had retired. Dieppe, and the delight and interest of the girls in that ancient port, furnished ample material for his epistles, each of which included a minute account of the day's doings. If she had only been with them, how perfect would have been the holiday! Poor Constance was forced to write frequently in return—it would have needed superhuman strength to let his letters go unanswered, even had there not been constant messages and several separate letters from her little friends.

Hubert had begun by informing her that they were going to marry in three months' time—which would allow her a full month of preparation after the end of her tour—and every now and again he repeated the statement, duly modified according to the date. He ignored all her disclaimers and reproofs, and would not pay her oft-reiterated argument the compliment of even a passing reference. He planned out their honeymoon—a tour through the south of Italy—and the life they were going to live afterwards with such vividness of detail, that again and again she had to shut her dazzled eyes against it. So steeped did Constance's mind become in Dieppe (as actuality) and in the paradise he kept setting before her (as phantasy), that her own existence grew shadowy, and she moved through her days like an automaton. This unforeseen campaign bewildered and discomfited her. As she passed from town to town letters followed and preceded her with amazing profusion, till she was at length driven to appeal for mercy. But Hubert remained merciless. She must feel that even at that distance his arm was round her, and she could not escape.

In the meantime he had no doubt he was gaining ground. Her resistance grew distressed—tearful—but he would not relax the attack. Nay, the month at Dieppe having run its course, Hubert hastened to follow up his advantage with the added pressure of his personal presence, for on the very following day after their arrival

home he went off again and intercepted her at Black-pool, where she found him on the platform awaiting her train.

She was startled almost out of her wits, but she separated quickly from her companions, who, naturally assuming this was a purely chance meeting with an acquaintance, went off their respective ways without appearing to bestow any special attention on Hubert.

The advance agent of the company had, at Constance's request, already retained rooms for her over a tea-shop, which she now found happened to be quite close by, and thither she invited him to accompany her. The tea-shop naturally gave her an opportunity of being hospitable, though she tried her hardest to make him feel she was cross with him for coming.

"But as I am only waiting for the end of your present engagement to claim you for a more permanent one, you surely didn't suppose that I could do without seeing you in the meanwhile."

His words seemed to shake her.

"You are becoming positively cruel," she said in a tone that was full of reproach. "I wish I had the strength to be abrupt with you, to call you all sorts of horrible names you don't deserve, to go to any length of rudeness, in fact, so as to make you wish never to see me again. But how can I forget what you have been for me?"

"Oh, you really mustn't think of breaking with me. The children would begin to ask what had become of you, and then I should be in a nice fix."

She smiled in spite of herself.

"I only wish I had the heart to break with you—fix or no fix! As it is, I have to resist as best I can, whereas there is no end to your horrible unscrupulousness. Now as soon as you have finished that cup of tea, Hubert, you are to go straight back home. I have to work to-night, and, as I'm mortally weary from travelling all day, I must try to get a little sleep during the next couple of hours."

"I'm going to stay in the town," he announced. "My appetite for holidays has been whetted! And unless you give me the answer I want I shall stop at every town on your list. If you wish to get rid of me, I warn you there's only one way."

As he foresaw, his victim could not hold out much longer, though she would not give way till almost her last moment at Blackpool.

The company was giving its final performance in the town, and was to be off by an early train in the morning. Hubert called for her at the theatre, and, as soon as she had come off in the third act, he took her for a stroll on the crowded sea-front. She was fearing his threat to keep up with the tour, and begged him piteously to abandon the idea. Hard as adamant, he was only willing to do so provided she capitulated.

She maintained a long silence. Were she not so obviously engaged in reflection, he might have fancied she had at last been driven to meet him by a deliberate refusal to speak. When pinned down again and again, she had had nothing better to say than that she was honestly of opinion he ought not to want to marry her, and he had so often reduced her to reiteration of this one argument that he might well entertain the suspicion as to her present intention.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, impatient at her prolonged meditation.

"I am thinking of your mother," she answered, though after some hesitation. "Forgive me for mentioning her, but it is the first time I have dared. Would she approve of me as your affianced wife? No, you know she would not, and she would be perfectly right."

"We are told in 'Genesis' that 'a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife.' Therefore I put you first."

"You ought not to choose a woman who has already thrown herself away upon a scamp—who has experienced so much of the gross side of things. For you a pure lily alone is fitting; I am discoloured and faded. No, no, I have nothing to offer you."

"You do yourself wrong. I cannot allow even you to disparage so dear a friend of mine."

"Well, it's only your opinion against mine, and I stick to my own."

"I have never known you to treat mine with such outrageous disrespect."

"But here a woman is concerned—the proverbial case in which the best of men are blind."

"Oh, well, let's throw opinions over! Won't you go by feeling?"

"Feeling!" she echoed. "Ought we not both to be perfectly reasonable? Are we not two sensible people, possessed of excellent understandings? At our age, you know, things are different. Maturity mustn't have feelings of that kind; it has its reputation for good sense to maintain. We must both be guided by cold mental judgment, and mine you are already acquainted with."

"If that's all the comfort I'm to get out of cold mental judgment—well, the sooner you cease to value your reputation for good sense, the better. As not the least of your admirers, I shall like you vastly better without it."

"I throw it away, then—I've only a blind feeling. I have struggled all I can, Hubert. I worship you!"

"Dear Constance," he said softly. "Now you are splendid!" The sentiment of the moment was fine and absorbing enough to take him forward rapturously.

Perhaps she detected something lacking in his voice, for the next moment she said almost plaintively—

"But I do wish you were a little in love with me, Hubert. This mature business is not very inspiring."

"Confound the mature business!" exclaimed Hubert, with emphasis. "We are going to make a big thing of our love."

She nestled closer to him. His enthusiasm began to seize hold of her, to destroy her misgivings that she had no right to the happiness she had accepted, and that she might be doing him a grave wrong. Yet her doubts found a last expression.

"You mustn't think me cold-blooded, Hubert; but I cannot easily rid myself of—the honest opinion I've maintained all along. Think it over again, please, and remember you are free if you so wish."

"And now, please, let that be the end, dear," he said as sternly as he could.

"I did not mean to hurt you, dear, so you'll forgive me. My words were at least sincerely intended, for my conscience is far from easy, and—oh! the happiness is too great for me to realize. I have suffered so much, Hubert, that I cannot grasp all at once."

"Look forward, dear! Turn your back to the past, and then plunge full in."

"In?" she queried.

"In the sunshine, the joy of things. We both surrender ourselves utterly to the big current!"

"Your strength will take me forward, dear," she whispered. "I love it. I loved it when it surrounded me and held me prisoner. And it is nice not to have to be so sensible. I like the illusions best."

"But what illusions? Are there not beautiful realities now?"

"Ah, Hubert, you forget our talks together in the past—when I first knew you. How you used to make me face truth and facts on the strength of my intelligence! When you invoked it that night at Yominster, I had, of course, to look sensible and live up to the invocation. But I wasn't a bit equal to the part. The way you spoke of a marriage between us, and the grounds of pure reason on which you put it forward, were a horror to me. And do you know, dear," she went on, her voice thrilling him with its half-laughing, half-caressing intonation, "I was mortally jealous of that fair, soft, shining thing of seventeen with the shimmering dresses."

And, in truth, she was still. That old romance to which Hubert had confessed rankled in her, though she knew the sentiment was blind and unjustifiable, and was thoroughly ashamed of it! And, in a corner of her heart, she still cherished her ancient grain of animosity

against Hubert for having been able to know her year after year without manifesting any symptom of sentimental admiration; not because he had not desired to marry her earlier, but because he had failed to pay her so agreeable a tribute.

BOOK IV

The Benedict

I

A TALL, sun-burnt man of distinguished bearing and in the very prime of life, wearing an easy-fitting grey suit and a straw hat, pushed open the little wooden gate in the hedge that bounded Mr. Hutchings' market-garden, descended the three or four steps, and then stood irresolute. Mr. Hutchings, however, appeared just then in the doorway of his cottage, and the visitor explained that he was in search of a very young lady, by name Miss May Ruthven, who, he had been told, was most likely to be found there. The market-gardener was able to inform him that Miss Ruthven was sketching somewhere alongside the brook that ran at the bottom of his grounds, and civilly offered to conduct him to her, but the stranger would not put him to that trouble, and pursued his way down the path indicated.

After a few minutes wandering he came upon the shallow, weedy stream to which he had been directed. The whole place was larger than he had expected, and so wild at this point that it was difficult to remember this was the mere picturesque fringe of high cultivation. He paused for a moment to look about him, then began to pick his way along a mossy footpath, glancing to right and left for such likely nooks as a young girl might love to lie hidden in.

He had gone a considerable distance before a gleam of colour that caught his eye between some foliage told him here at last was the little person he sought. Instinctively he quickened his step, and came upon her seated in the ancient punt that lay, as it had lain for years, alongside the dilapidated landing-stage. She was busily engaged with a small canvas that rested on her knee, her right

hand manipulating a brush jerkily, whilst her left, holding out a much-besmeared palette, seemed to have got abstracted and to be having deep thoughts of its own. So much absorbed was she in her work that the visitor stood watching her for a minute or two without her becoming aware of his presence.

He had scarcely anticipated the sort of person she turned out to be—her unexpected completeness astonished him. She might in fact have been seventeen, if she hadn't been so obviously twelve. Her knitted brow, her look of intense seriousness and preoccupation, were highly becoming to the miniature face, with its clear yet delicate features, fine grey eyes, and beautiful silken hair that hung in a flowing mass under her simple sailor's hat.

He ventured at last to step on to the landing-stage and overlook her canvas. She was painting a bit of the high bank opposite, gay with wild flowers, the sunlit water filling the foreground.

The creaking of the rotten boards made her turn and look up. Their eyes met, and he saw her face change immediately—it became calm, dignified, unapproachable!

He bowed her a good afternoon, without, however, giving any sign that he had the least idea who she was, and he went on to express the hope that he wasn't disturbing her. But she merely gave him an almost imperceptible nod and continued plying her brush. Evidently she wasn't at all disposed to encourage a conversation. Indeed, he felt most distinctly that he was expected to continue his ramble, and could not help admiring the easy, self-possessed fashion in which she contrived that that desirability should suggest itself to him.

But, so far from budging, he came a shade closer, and sedulously kept examining the sketch, smiling as he divined the frown which he could not see—her face being now turned away from him.

"Your method is certainly promising!" He made the pronouncement in a tone of decided patronage.

The frown deepened. His appearance had impressed her, but she did not at all approve of his persistence.

"Is it?" she asked with an indifferent air of astonishment which likewise again suggested he might stroll on further. But, with an affected thickheadedness, he preferred to construe her monosyllables as a literal question instead of a mere expletive.

He set about criticizing in detail and with evident interest—for the sketch was well-nigh finished. She soon perceived that he had the right to speak, though she would just as well have done without his comments, frank to the verge of severity. So she listened coldly and unwillingly (at first she had indignantly tried hard not to hear him at all), even while she was forced to admit to herself that his remarks were quite clever, and his voice and features of the pleasantest.

However, she let him finish without interrupting, and then thanked him gravely. He felt it was Greek against Greek, and was hugely amused.

"I think I have seen you before," he launched.

"Oh, I daresay," she returned carelessly.

"In fact I am sure of it."

"It's very possible." She was scrutinizing her work and putting in touches.

"A very pretty place this!"

"Very. But I hope I haven't interrupted your walk."

"Oh," he protested, gravely maintaining his pretence of stupidity. "I assure you, my dear young lady, you've not interrupted me in the least. On the contrary, it has been a great pleasure to me to make your acquaintance."

"You are very kind," she murmured, not without a touch of impatience.

"Kind! Not at all!" he blurted. "It is you who have been kind."

"Really!" she exclaimed sarcastically.

"You listened with such charming patience to all the savage things I said just now, but, being a candid sort of character, I really could not help saying them."

"You are an artist," she exclaimed, relenting a little and setting him down as a harmless enthusiast.

"No," he disclaimed; "only an admirer!"

"Of art?"

"And of you!"

"How interesting!" She spoke with marked severity, determined that the conversation should end there and then.

He fumbled in his waistcoat pocket and brought out something that shone as it caught the sunlight. She could not help glancing at it curiously as he held it towards her smilingly. It was the half of a plain gold ring.

"Oh, this is very alarming," she gasped.

"I promise faithfully to be your sweetheart true for always!" he reminded her.

She stared at him, then could scarce refrain from laughter.

He looked sorrowful and dejected.

"Such is life," he declared plaintively. "I ought not to have expected anything better. And to think of your indignation when I predicted this would be the very way you'd receive me."

She had no doubt now she had been accosted by a lunatic. "Aren't you making a mistake?" she suggested, not altogether unalarmed, and trying to handle him gently.

"We used to be such very good friends, Miss Ruthven," he went on reproachfully. "Where is the other half of my ring? I suppose you forgot all about it years ago."

Her eyes were wide open now, and her brush lay in the dust at the bottom of the punt. In her white, scared face was clearly visible the struggle to recover memories that just stirred evasively and rushed her back through the crowded years of childhood, each as long and busy as a century.

"I remember you," she said suddenly, as the colour flooded back to her cheeks. She sprang out of the punt. "Only you were not so brown, nor so stout, and your beard was shorter. But it suits you very well the way you wear it now."

He took both her hands. "But why did you forget everything like that?" he asked.

"Oh, what nonsense!" she said in her girlish, off-hand way. "Uncle was talking about you only last night. He said you were probably in Patagonia. You are his best friend, aren't you?"

"I hope so."

"Well, I think you are a strange best friend."

"But tell me, what have you done with your half of the ring?"

"Oh, I haven't seen it for years," she replied with the same nonchalance as before. "I daresay it's lying about somewhere. It's so very long ago since you gave it to me—I was only a tiny child then."

"And now you despise such things!"

"Oh, how absurd! I suppose you have already seen uncle?"

"I only arrived yesterday—late in the evening. I had a great deal to do this morning, and so I thought it better to run down here than to intercept him for a minute in town. I knew, of course, he wouldn't have got home yet, but I did not suppose I should find the house absolutely deserted."

"Gweny goes up to town on Tuesdays for her music lesson," she explained; "and uncle brings her home again. Dearie has gone to call on some people, and I found it rather dull all by myself. But if you'll kindly allow me the use of my hands, Mr. Preston, I'll gather up my things, and take you back to tea. Do you know, I rather enjoy being hostess."

"I should imagine you'd make a first-rate one," he observed. "Well, the least I can offer in return for your taking me back is to take your things back."

Soon they were moving along side by side, and chatting away on the happiest of terms; he charmingly attentive and protective, she animated and gay, with a big sense both of her resplendent cavalier and of the eventfulness of his coming. Nevertheless he was noticing her closely. And, indeed, she was showing herself in all sorts of lights. She was the frank, open-hearted girl-child, loving all that children love, full of enthusiasm, and with a naïve, boundless joy in every pleasure; she

was shrewd, clear-sighted, a merciless mocker, a clever manoeuvrer. She was the charming companion, unaffectedly good-natured and comrade-like; she was the fine lady, proudly conscious of her superiority to common clay, and armed with a subtle finesse of manner that made her quite equal to a *role* on the stage of life. Altogether Preston perceived in her a great deal of originality, and he was vastly amused at her excellent stock of well-bred conventional phrases which she brought out prettily in the right places in connection with the more dignified and grown-up side of her character.

Meantime she was confidential with him to the verge of imprudence, which (seeing how clever a little person she was) might have astonished him, had he not understood he was to her a unique being suddenly descended from the skies, and she was glad to tell everything to one who was so new, yet so intimate and important. He, of course, in the state of his ignorance about all that appertained to Hubert's present life, welcomed the chance of enlightenment—for he was being enlightened far more than she imagined; though primarily the sweet flood of her discourse was concerned with herself—her secrets, her occupations, her likes, and dislikes—and everything and everybody else only figured therein so far as they affected that central and important consciousness. As most things and persons imprinted themselves very sharply thereon, her painting of the neighbourhood became most vivid to him. The world seemed to have been created specially for her entertainment. Scarcely a soul but had characteristics that afforded exercise for her ridicule. Yet she was in no wise ill-natured, and was always lavish of enthusiasm where her affections had been engaged.

And although, as she danced along, she overflowed with all this eager rattle, she never for a moment forgot the immediate present or failed to have a quick eye for everything in the landscape. As she led him through the pretty by-ways, she had something to say about every house and farm and field—always dashed in parenthetically.

By the time they struck the main road, Preston was in possession of the chief new facts in Hubert's life, and that without any marked questioning on his part. He manifested no surprise when it dawned upon him his friend had a wife—had had one, as he was able to make out presently, for two years. That was the mysterious person whom May was habitually referring to as 'Dearie.' Ever since the marriage, he gathered, the Ruthvens had had very many more people coming to see them, and only three months before there had been great doings in the house on the occasion when one of Dearie's sisters had married a gentleman-farmer in this very district.

"We have ever so many friends now," she told him in a tone that implied an immense satisfaction. "So now Dearie goes out visiting a great deal, and though she always complains to uncle that it makes her very tired, I know she enjoys herself all the same. I only wish I were old enough to go visiting."

She put quite a wistful intonation into her last sentence.

Preston thought the taste somewhat unnatural, but discreetly kept the opinion to himself. He hazarded, however—

"Perhaps you might not find it quite the joy you imagined. I dare say your experience has taught you by now that many things *are* disappointing in this world."

She opened her eyes wide. Such a disparagement of the world was astonishing to her.

"You mustn't think I've had no experience of visiting," she exclaimed. "Why, Gwen and I go to all the children's parties. And then we go out to tea quite often, for we are special favourites. Everybody likes to know *us*, and to come to the house, and don't they all say sweet things to Dearie! Dearie is always so pleased and happy, and she swallows everything they tell her. But I know why they make such a fuss over her. It's because they know Lady Wycliffe is such a great friend of uncle's, and her great chum, the Honourable Mrs.

Drummond, who is the big lady of the neighbourhood, visits us regularly. Gwen and I are great favourites of Mrs. Drummond's, and she often has us to pass the afternoon. Whenever Lady Wycliffe comes to stay with her, she sends round the carriage to fetch us. They are both such dear old ladies, and so kind! I like them much better than the other people round here. So you see, Mr. Preston, that, though I am still a mere child, I am quite in society. I mean to go out a great deal when I'm grown up, as I'm very rich, or at least I shall be when I'm twenty-one. . . . And rich people, you know, are wanted everywhere," she wound up laughingly.

"Ah, your views of the world are distinctly tinged with cynicism."

"What is that?" she asked. "It's much too mysterious a word for a mere child." She was evidently fond of this playful mode of self-allusion.

"'Cynicism' is difficult to define. You may take it that I was struck by your exactness of observation. But I had no idea you were an heiress! Has your uncle discovered a gold-mine?"

"You are a strange best friend," she said again. "Why, you don't seem to know anything about us."

"You must remember I've been in wild, out-of-the-way places, often quite beyond the range of any postman, and it's almost three years now since I had a letter from Hubert. One big batch of letters I know went wrong, and a great sackful is waiting for me in Wales."

"Then you've never heard that poor granny died eighteen months ago. It was of a broken heart—she didn't approve of uncle's marriage."

"Hubert's mother dead!" exclaimed Preston. "How he must have been cut up!"

He walked on in silence. He had only just been congratulating himself that his friend had apparently been spared the more tragic griefs of existence, and he was altogether unprepared for so painful an announcement. Indeed, the shock for the moment obscured the hint of accompanying dramatic circumstances. But he

had taken everything in, and presently found himself wondering what manner of woman it was Hubert had married, and why she had failed so signally to come up to the old Mrs. Ruthven's expectations. That she was a somewhat conventional person he had already gathered, for he trusted the child's clear vision, on which he could place his own more sophisticated and experienced interpretation. Though he had his fears that Hubert "had rather messed up things," and there was a great deal about which he was eager for enlightenment, he could not, of course, pursue the subject with his sprightly companion.

"I am sorry—very sorry!" was all he was impelled to say when at last he spoke again.

She divined the depth of his feeling, slight as was its manifestation.

"Granny was awfully nice," she resumed in a soberer tone. "We were all very fond of her. But she had to be humoured. After uncle's marriage, she never came to see us again. (Of course Gwenny and I are supposed not to understand anything of the whole matter.) And then one day we heard she had died quite suddenly. She hated Dearie—though I could never make out why myself. I believe it was only a whim, because uncle didn't tell her everything beforehand."

"And I suppose your fortune came from her?"

"She left five thousand pounds to me, and the same to Gwenny. Uncle was very much surprised. He had no idea she had so much money. But here we are!"

She ordered his old room to be made ready, and, when he had taken possession of it, went off herself to effect a rapid change of toilette. When he came down again, he found her already on the verandah, and busy over a charming tea-table. He sank into the low-cushioned chair she graciously allotted him, feeling very much in awe of the grand little lady into which the friendly artist of the simple stuff frock and old sailor's hat had transmogrified herself. Consciously enacting the hostess, and consciously doing it well, she was a

quaint mixture of dignified formality and delightful unconstraint. He saw—and not for the first time—that she had of graces many. Her most careless movement was perfect in its way, whether she reclined back in her chair, or bent forwards, or put out her hand to take up her cup, or raised her face to his, and kept it in motionless attention as he spoke. Nor did she please his eye the less when she suddenly sprang up in her girlish impulsive fashion to refill his cup which she had neglected for a moment or two after it was empty.

Naturally she still had a great deal to tell him. A whole week could scarcely have exhausted all that was ready to flow from her mind, nor, indeed, could providence have sent her a more willing listener. Of course, her conversation remained, as before, for the most part frankly egotistic. She had a pony of her own, a dear thing which she must take him to see presently (some day soon she would race him); she played tennis—and challenged him; she gardened—and would show him what she had this year made of her own bit of ground; she painted and drew—had enough sketches to enable him to say savage things to his candid heart's content; she played and sang—though not the show musician of the family; she was fond of reading—she liked fairy-tales and history best, and often browsed among the dusty tomes in Hubert's library. She astonished him, too, by confessing a liking for chemistry, a forlorn, capricious inclination, which, alone of the sciences, had somehow strayed in amid her eager accomplishments. Most other formal studies she did not care for very much. Miss Williams, who was now a bachelor of arts, still superintended their studies, though it had been decided she and Gwenny were to go to school in the autumn, and they both liked the idea.

"But uncle can't quite make up his mind what kind of a place to select. I think it must be very nice to go to a good school for a couple of years. Of course not a boarding-school, but a day-college where they treat you in a sensible way. We should lodge with friends, perhaps with Dearie's mother."

"Then you'll be going to London. I suppose you're looking forward to it?"

"Oh yes, indeed."

"You're very fond of London?"

Her eyes lit up with an ecstasy that spoke more clearly than any words.

"London! I never get enough of it. Gwenny is more fortunate, as she is supposed to be studying music seriously with Madame Bartolozzi. It is seldom that poor May gets an excuse for going. Uncle doesn't care for London much, once he has done his work; but then he is perfectly happy among his books. When I grow up, I mean to live in London at least half the year. Last time we drove down Park Lane, Dearie told me who lived in each house. Dearie often reads about them in a large red book—all about their ancestors and their sons and daughters, and the years in which they were born."

"Another unnatural taste," reflected Preston. It struck him as more mysterious than ever that Hubert's mother should have taken so tragic an antipathy to this apparently model daughter-in-law.

"It's not often that uncle thinks of taking us to a theatre," she sighed. "Now I love the theatre, but here we get only a circus now and again. Of course there's the theatre at Yominster, but there isn't much excitement or enjoyment in going to that awful barn, and, besides, I don't at all approve of the acting. The circus isn't half bad though. The lions and tigers are splendid. I should like to have a tiger for a pet. Kitties are all very well, but they're too tame and too tiny. I want a real, fierce, beautiful tiger with a magnificent roar. I always get very angry when I see them walking round and round their cages, lashing their tails. I should just love to let them out—it would be such fun to see the people scampering away in terror."

"But what if the dear things made a meal of *you*!"

"They wouldn't hurt me," she declared confidently. "They'd all come to me at my call and lie down quite nicely, and I'd smooth their manes and call them pet names."

And they'd keep perfectly still whilst I sketched them—of course I'd flatter them a little in the drawing. After that they'd love me and protect me, and nobody in the world would dare to harm me."

"My dear girl, you could not go about all your life with a troop of lions and tigers. You'd be finding them a nuisance after a time."

"That was only a picture for the moment."

"Well, tell me, what is your real ambition—if you have any real ambition?"

"I have a great many real ambitions," she assured him; "but what I should like best of all is to be a great princess and have a beautiful palace and give wonderful parties."

"And invite all the people in the large red book," he suggested.

"Yes," she agreed seriously. "And Gwenny could come and sing. She has really a beautiful voice. Madame Bartolozzi teaches her very well, you know, but she puts strange ideas into her head." Already she was darting off along another track. "Sometimes Gwen talks to me about them. Of course I tell her they're all rot, and then you should see her stare at me—just as if she were expecting an earthquake the very next moment. I am really glad I thought of mentioning it to you. I wanted to mention it to someone."

"What ideas do you mean?" asked Preston.

"Oh, about religion," said May very solemnly. "Madame Bartolozzi is a Catholic, and she and Gwen took up with each other specially years ago."

"Do you mean that she tries to convert her?"

"Well, not exactly that, but as Madame is very religious and talks a good deal about religion to her, Gwen picks up things. Gwenny is good, you know; I am the naughty one!"

"Oh, I daresay there's no harm done," said Preston. "When she grows up she'll have her own opinions. What does your uncle say?"

"Uncle doesn't know anything about it. I haven't said a word to him—that would be sneaking—although

he has more little talks with me than with Gwenny. I am the favourite, but I'm sure he doesn't know it. He thinks he is the same to both of us. Uncle has rather good ideas. He used to tell us what he thought about religion himself, at least so far as we mere children could be expected to understand him. When we grow up, we are to be free to choose for ourselves. Now I like that!"

"But what does Mrs. Hubert say?" asked Preston, growing interested.

"Oh, she goes to church regularly. She likes us to go as well. Besides, uncle himself is different from what he used to be. I think he must be changing—though he has never said anything about it to me yet, at least not in any direct way. I fancy he sometimes hints at things, but perhaps he doesn't like to go back on what he used to tell us. Anyhow, it's very difficult to understand what exactly he does think. He goes to church with the rest of us sometimes. I remember Mr. Rutherford—the vicar—was perfectly radiant with joy the first time he saw uncle with us in the pew. He smiled and smiled at him all through the sermon, and I'm sure he put in a lot extempore specially for uncle's benefit. After the service he came to shake hands with us all, and I really thought he'd have uncle's arm out of its socket."

"For a little infidel you seem to allow yourself to be haled off to church pretty meekly."

"Oh, I'm not exactly an infidel. And I don't mind going to church at all—though, of course, I don't pretend to like it as much as Gwenny. You should see her sitting there pale and awe-struck. I am sure she must be frightfully superstitious, what with all the moonshine Madame Bartolozzi puts into her head. She left off taking notice of all the poor beasties, because Madame told her that if you get too fond of animals you begin to lose your affection for people. And Gwenny takes it all in."

"There's rather more in that superstition than you think," declared Preston. "I once got very fond of all animals, and I found myself hating most people in the world."

She looked extremely surprised. "But it was only fancy," she suggested.

"No—for it would still hold good now, only I came to the conclusion that people weren't even worth hating."

She wrinkled her brow. "That's very puzzling!"

He dropped the point somewhat abruptly. "I wonder if you'll continue going to church when you are your own mistress."

"I suppose I shall. One must do as everybody else does. One ought not to shock people unnecessarily," she said gravely. "Now Master Francis—he is the vicar's son—he boasts that he doesn't believe anything at all. That's very wrong of him. But really—how I have been chattering! I hope you haven't been bored?"

"Bored! You have entertained me delightfully."

She found the compliment to her taste. "How splendid!" she exclaimed. "Now I shall let you write your name in my nice new book with a nice new thought of your own."

She ran off to fetch it—a luxurious violet-scented album with soft-tinted satiny pages.

"It has only just been given to me, so that yours will be its first autograph."

On the fly-leaf she had already inscribed her own name with her address and a date. There was distinction and individuality in the handwriting, with a tinge of affectation and self-consciousness. Backhanded, yet firm, clear and artistic, with large s's flowing far below the line and very elaborate capitals, it spoke of glowing youth, of a haughty consciousness of high superiority—in fine, of a very big ego.

"I should like something about music—something very charming for the first page."

Preston considered, dipped the pen in the ink, considered again, and finally attacked the shining roseate page with considerable nerve.

"Music is but the echo of beauty that is in ourselves."

"How sweet! how pretty!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "I like that very much."

She looked really pleased. She waited till the ink was dry, then produced the long-neglected half of her visitor's ring, which she had brought at the same time as the album.

"See!" she said, holding it towards him. "Here it is, safe after all. I looked for it just now—I was feeling rather guilty about it."

"You're not expecting me to take it back?" he asked glumly.

"Well, I'm not sure I ought to keep it," she said doubtfully.

"Ah, you dislike me."

"No, indeed," she protested. "I like you very much. You are a brick. There, I shall keep it after all. And now let me show you my pony."

II

WHEN Preston had exhausted all the sight-seeing (for the visit to May's pony had naturally extended itself into a personally-conducted tour), he was taken back to the verandah and then through one of the tall French windows into the drawing room—for Hubert's library had been long since dispossessed and re-established overhead. Preston preferred his memory of the former room, with its strange outline splendidly filled in with books, to the present daintier version, panelled in white and gold, and prettily set out with rugs and water-colour sketches, satinwood furniture, Dresden china and old silver. But then, he admitted, he was prejudiced. A beautifully-bound book on a tiny table, which his hand mechanically turned over, proved to be a translation of Machiavelli's *History of Florence*. He asked May whether she had read it—since she was fond of history. She replied that the only reason she hadn't read it (though she had taken it up several times) was that it was part of the drawing-room, and she preferred to browse in the library. She had, however, just finished Roscoe's *Life of Leo the Tenth*, and intended some day to read the whole of Machiavelli. Indeed, she had a pronounced taste for Italian history, and Hubert had in fact promised her that, a few years hence, she should pass as long a time in Italy as she might desire.

A rustling in the doorway just then informed Preston they were no longer alone. Turning his head instinctively, he beheld an extraordinarily happy-looking woman (still in bonnet and jacket), very fair, with refined features and large, girlish eyes. She had stopped on the threshold, evidently surprised at the sight of a visitor. But

May at once tripped over to her, and, kissing her affectionately, called out laughingly—

"A very old friend of mine has come to see us, dearie."

Constance looked perplexed for an instant, but smiled at Preston as May, holding both her hands, almost drew her forward into the room.

"An old friend of our little girl's is indeed welcome," she assured him.

The frankness and unaffected cordiality of her manner, and something in the ring of her voice which seemed to indicate a really nice nature, modified agreeably the preliminary idea he had formed of her.

"Mr. Preston is perfectly at home already," said May. "I have been entertaining him delightfully."

"Mr. Preston!" Constance was all white. "Good gracious!" she gasped, then laughed and held out her hand. "Give me a moment, please, to collect my wits. I have always looked upon my meeting with you as a most important and dramatic event, but I never imagined anything so unawares as this. It is really hard on me to be caught in this way, just after having indulged in a riot of small gossip and weak tea."

"Oh, but Mr. Preston has been doing exactly the same thing," put in May, indicating the table on the verandah.

"Saucy child!" said Constance. "I hope your riot, Mr. Preston, was not too much of a trial."

"Oh!" exclaimed May indignantly.

"On the contrary," smiled Preston; "I have learnt that small gossip and weak tea—if that is what I have been indulging in—have a charm in combination that I never before suspected."

"A new pleasure for you to cultivate!" laughed Constance. "Once upon a time I used to have a certain contempt for that sort of thing, or, at least, for the small gossip—weak tea is quite an old indulgence of mine—but as one gets older one begins to develop the taste. I find it so soothing and refreshing, quite the pleasantest form of recreation, in fact, after household management.

And the more malicious the gossip, the better I like it! I really ought to feel ashamed of myself."

"Not in the least," he declared. "The taste for scandal—and even for poking one's nose into other folks' business—is perfectly genuine, and ought to be accorded honourable recognition. It is really artistic at bottom—represents the natural craving of the dramatic instincts. The novelists have merely caught up the hint. Great creative work and small gossip grow from the same root."

"Ah, well, I am dying to have some gossip with you, small or large; but Hubert will be here soon, and domestic matters, alas, must claim me for awhile. You are staying the night, I hope."

"If I may presume on your hospitality."

"Then please amuse yourself. Why not astonish Hubert by letting him find you in his study—you might pretend to be your ghost! There are large accumulations of books since you were here last. You will find they have overflowed into most of the other rooms. And, by the way, Mr. Preston, I want to take the opportunity of thanking you for introducing me to my husband. I always meant that to be my first greeting to you, but, of course, I had no idea I should be thrown out of my reckoning like this."

"So you were my introduction," repeated Preston with a laugh. "To be frank, I have no recollection of the occasion—nor even of you. As you had no recollection of me, I mean personally, of course, that is only tit for tat. So let us forgive each other."

"Willingly," she agreed good-humouredly. "But please try to remember me all the same. I shall feel so complimented if you succeed—before Hubert gives me away. I have never forgotten the fateful moment, but, truth to tell, I accept the fact entirely on Hubert's authority that the vague somebody who adroitly got rid of me after only two seconds of conversation was no other than Mr. Preston."

"I passed on to him so many pretty women in the old days. Hubert was so much more proof against the

sex than I, and I was always mortally afraid of finding myself in the toils."

"Why afraid?" she retorted. "I'm sure it would have been a very good thing for you."

He only smiled in reply, so with an "*au revoir*" she left him to occupy himself as best he might. But he had not the slightest intention of cudgelling his brains in the effort to recall when and where he had been the instrument of first bringing Hubert and his wife together. The fact itself he looked upon as a mere amusing coincidence—indeed, the more he reflected on it, the more it amused him. He had no reason for supposing that Hubert was mistaken; the incident was perfectly likely on the face of it. The name of Constance Powers he might, no doubt, have remembered—the thought of the unimportant actress whom his friend had avowedly visited *did* vaguely hover in his mind as it plunged back to the Pump Court days; but out of so many possibilities it did not occur to him to identify Mrs. Ruthven with a person who, as Hubert had informed him at the time, had married somebody else.

Presently he thought it would be a good idea to adopt Mrs. Ruthven's suggestion that he should wait for Hubert in the library, especially as he hadn't seen the room yet. So May readily led the way upstairs, and even stayed with him a little to explain things. His face lighted up as all Hubert's old treasures caught his eye, from the fat Dutch cabinet to the Frisian clock. As he put it to May, the sight of them made him feel more than anything else had done that he was really home again. Indeed, it was almost like being back at the old place in Pump Court.

Soon his little friend left him to get ready for the evening, and he spent some pleasant minutes moving about the room, taking down a book here and there, handling a curio, or inspecting a familiar engraving. Finally, finding himself a little fatigued, he came to a stand by one of the windows, and, vaguely looking out across the garden, he fell a-pondering on his impressions

of this little corner of life which he had let strike so suddenly on his consciousness.

Having thus far had only the merest glimpse of Hubert's wife, he hesitated as yet to form any very definite conception of her. To some extent he was easier in his mind now, for he admitted he had been anxious as to the sort of person his friend had married. It was a firm article of faith with him that the best woman in the world was scarcely good enough for Hubert, so that the standard he was instinctively impelled to apply was of a terrible severity—a fact of which poor Constance had been happily ignorant. Whatever misgivings he might still entertain about her, she had, at any rate, struck him as intelligent, and he hoped that that quality of hers was not merely illusory. His experience had taught him to distrust first impressions of a woman's intelligence, and he held that the woman—by no means uncommon—who was brisk and bright superficially, yet stupid in the depths of her nature, was the worst possible companion for a clever man. He had a feeling, too, that Hubert's wife was a woman with a story; the fact somehow seemed writ on her, though the writing, still visible to his sharp eyes, was faint and blurred by continued prosperity and happy domesticity. Perhaps, indeed, poor old Mrs. Ruthven had really discovered something against her; or was it merely the lack of a fortune had called forth that bitter hostility? He did not doubt that she was a good soul—he had most distinctly felt she was! Her friendly, unembarrassed way had at once appealed to him, and he attributed to her both candour and the gift of good-fellowship. Still he missed something in her, something that was fine and lofty and noble—in the Pagan sense rather than the moral. Her bonnet and jacket might have subtly suggested it to him, but a fatal hint of the *bourgeoise* had come from her, at the moment of her entrance, fresh from paying calls. Certainly the ways of convention were pleasant to her.

He had noticed that there were now five servants at

least about the house and garden—though he was not addicted to observing details of that kind. Also the new stable had several stalls and inmates, while a smart *calèche* besides the well-known trap had already caught his eye. Then, of course, there must be another carriage in which Mrs. Ruthven had done her afternoon's visiting. Preston fervently hoped that Hubert, who had never had any fortune of his own, was not killing himself to maintain these appurtenances of gentility, and it was at least some comfort to reflect that the children now had means of their own. He wondered, by the way, what Gwenny looked like—the Gwenny who sat awe-struck in church, and had a beautiful voice. He imagined her pale and in velvet, singing in a beautiful cathedral. That was because he was an artist, and fugitive hints and impressions had a way of shaping themselves brilliantly.

And as regards May herself, how was it she had said nothing about charity or love of the poor? Preston was really concerned about the omission on her part, but he liked her too well to doubt she was kind-hearted. She was, indeed, a strange mixture of charming imaginativeness and pleasure-loving Philistinism. On the latter he scarcely liked to dwell; it was pleasanter to wish that the other soul in her might gain the ascendancy as she grew older.

For a beautiful other soul it was when it entirely took possession of her! How sweetly and gravely she had said, as, crossing the lawn in the lengthening shadows, they had passed a swarm of evening flies, "Let them be happy—they have only a few hours to live." She had confessed, too, to stealing out of doors on summer nights when all the world slumbered, just to see what was happening in the moonlight. Truly there was a charming touch of fantasy in her, and of a kind that was her very own. He had not only felt it in her personality, but it was stamped on everything that belonged to her.

III

PRESTON'S back was turned to the door, but Hubert recognized it at once and was less startled at its presence in his study than the conspirators had anticipated. He knew his man too well, had, indeed, always expected he would suddenly appear in some such fashion. But if Hubert wasn't frightened into imagining that he beheld his friend's ghost, Preston, as he turned and caught sight of the figure in the doorway came near to entertaining that very idea with regard to Hubert.

"The devil!" he cried.

"Of all greetings the most frivolous and dismal," said Hubert.

They laughed and clasped hands.

"I did not mean you, of course," said Preston. "But stand a moment. The afternoon sunlight is shining full upon you. Your face has many lines. It is sad, gentle, forbearing. It is serious and learned, full of high philosophy. You are handsomer than you were—what with the dash of grey in your hair; but your cheeks are thinner. You look tired and overworked."

"Well, I have hardly had time as yet to shake off the dust of the Strand. My work though of late *has* been rather heavy. For which I am most thankful. The more fees—the merrier for my little nest of singing-birds. And you must understand that I join in the singing too."

"I am glad to find you are so much more lively than you appear," said Preston, who did not seem very much relieved notwithstanding. "You are barely forty, but you look nearer fifty. Evidently you are well on the way to the Bench. If you only proceed at the

same rate, why, in another ten years you'll be the very image of a judge! I believe you must be strenuously cultivating the type. Only your stoop must now remain as it is; it is quite marked enough—even for the Bench. And a little more flesh wouldn't hurt. I hope you don't neglect exercise."

"I have my regular canter across country," Hubert assured him; "and I frequently take a racket at tennis with the girls. My appetite and my digestion are excellent. My dear fellow, I am not nearly the wreck I appear to have impressed you as being—there is not the least reason for concern about my health... I am certainly not worried about yours," he added, laughing.

"Yes, I *have* put flesh on," admitted Preston. "In the olden days when I kept on bothering my head so much about the universe, I used to waste away. But ever since I learnt to say: 'Let the universe go its own way and be damned,' I have fattened wonderfully. My thought at present partakes of my corporeal nature—it deals only with solidities."

"Some day you'll find the fat has been accumulating a little too fast, and then perhaps you'll be glad to work it off by clutching after the universe again and trying to make it go *your* way. But your solidities remind me of those with which we are more immediately concerned—the succulent solidities we shall be called upon to deal with in a few minutes."

"Oh, you had better get cleaned then. I have already taken possession of my room, and I know my way about."

It was a happy little party that assembled soon after, though dinner was delayed considerably beyond the few minutes mentioned by Hubert; Preston smilingly divining abnormal preparations as Constance, busy and anxious, made a pretence of being with them in the drawing-room yet kept slipping discreetly out of it. Her anxieties were at last apparently allayed, for she was smiling gaily when she took her seat at table.

At first Preston was the most talkative of all, keeping the others well entertained with some account of his

itinerary and odd bits of his experiences and adventures. Hubert sat beaming happily at the head of the gaily-spread board—with its charming candelabra and exquisite flowers—his cheeks all in a glow, and looking very much better than when he had first arrived home. Constance, facing her husband, seemed the very embodiment of pride in her well-ordered household; a shade more ceremonious, now that she was presiding in her own dining-room—as the stately domesticity of the atmosphere demanded. The fresh, coquettish manner of youth had already passed into the even demeanour and temperament of the mistress of a home. She was pleased and sleek and happy—almost to purring point, as Preston put it to himself. Indeed, as she sat there discreetly attentive and smilingly encouraging, she distinctly reminded him of the innumerable cousins and sisters of his own. Hubert might just as well have married one of *his* clan, he reflected. He could have offered him an immense choice of that sort of woman, with a touch of patrician quality, moreover, that this one lacked, and with birth, breeding, and fortune enough to have added another score of years to the old Mrs. Ruthven's existence! He was really sorry now he had not contrived to keep Hubert in the family.

With Gwenny, Preston found himself singularly pleased—she was so astonishingly like the ideal figure her sister's chatter had caused him to imagine. Slightly taller than May, she was evidently of a far less robust type. Yet she was undoubtedly beautiful with her child's rounded features, her graceful neck, her dark-brown hair, becomingly encircled with a velvet band. The ivory pallor of her complexion gave her an added distinction, and in few girls' faces had Preston seen so perfect a goodness. She was quiet and attentive most of the time, opening large eyes when much interested. When she spoke it was with shyness and diffidence, which, however, only made her the more sweet and winning. For her remarks were distinctly good, her questions to the point.

But May was just May!—always charming, and brimming over with life and excitement.

Though the two men were eager to be alone together, they would not show themselves impatient or break up the pleasant party. In the drawing-room the girls sang and played, and it was not till quite late in the evening, and Gwenny and May had said good-night, that the two friends found themselves together in the study.

The windows were open, and the summer air flowed in softly. Hubert sank into a deep arm-chair with a languor as of everlasting fatigue. Preston stood gazing a moment or two across the grey lawn and the shadowy masses of wood and thicket. Then he turned again into the light and looked Hubert in the face.

"Well, there you are, old fellow, comfortably at anchor in your old tub of an arm-chair." He took a restless turn or two round the room, as if in significant contrast.

"Yes, it does feel pretty comfortable," admitted Hubert; "and when one's at anchor, time speeds astonishingly. Yet the old days seem very far off. When I look back my former self seems the veriest shadow. But perhaps I *was* a shadow then!"

"*My* old self," said Preston, "rather amuses me. Looking back, I can see it going its way and playing its antics as if it were entirely an external person; as if it hadn't the faintest connection with the present 'me.' But confound my 'me'—that still has the sturdy backbone of an income to support its insolent pretensions. There's many a better man than I will be waiting ere the morrow's dawn outside the dock-gates—only to be disappointed of a job. Well, well, but I want to hear how your ego has been faring, what sort of a backbone it has been acquiring, and, of course, everything else about it as well as the state of its bones. I suppose you are still a democrat."

"I hope so," returned Hubert, smiling; "though I must confess I have long forfeited my claim to rank among the fighters. I fear I have passed entirely into the obscurity of a quiet, large practice, and all my controversial energy has been absorbed at the same time."

"Yet I imagine you are the same old Hubert in spite of everything!"

Hubert mused a little. "I have changed more than you would think."

"You have turned to religion!" Preston hazarded quickly. He could not help remembering May's account of Hubert's church-going.

There was a moment of silence. "Well, in a way," said Hubert reflectively at length.

"You had always a touch of the mystic about you. At one time I thought it possible you might end in a cloister. Still your experience is by no means exceptional. The priest who knows his business knows he has only to smile and bide his time."

"I have not yet told you about my poor mother." Hubert bowed his head.

"I have heard," said Preston huskily.

"It was her death that changed me, that wrought in me such refinements of softening as I had never before conceived. I need not dwell now on the cloud that descended on me and mine. Anyhow, it was then that I began to reconsider the question of a future life. But when I say 'reconsider' I use the wrong word. Previously, as you know, I occupied a purely agnostic position, keeping a perfectly open mind."

"You took up a comfortable seat at the fulcrum," interposed Preston, "leaving faith and scepticism to swing each other up and down."

"It was a slippery seat all the same," said Hubert, smiling. "Well, after my poor mother's death, I simply found myself so possessed by spiritual feeling that it seemed as if I had been stupidly blind all my life."

"I feel myself defrauded of a most subtle and joyous sensation," exclaimed Preston. "I'd give a year of my life to be a priest now for five minutes in order to gloat over this confession of yours. What waste! What waste!"

"Let me give you some kümmel instead," suggested Hubert, as bottles and glasses gleaming from a distant side-table caught his eye just then.

"More confession first, please."

"There's very little more to tell. As you yourself prac-

tically observed just now, my old self was never entirely incompatible with the new. Indeed, there was scarcely a breach of continuity. As you know, I was always perfectly tolerant. In that respect I am glad to say I have not changed in the least. I always said the girls should be free to follow their own inspiration, and it is my intention to maintain that attitude. I sincerely think it the best—one always values what one has chosen for oneself. But, in any case, I should never have thought of making a sudden autocratic descent upon them and forcing them into one path. As it is, I have the greatest confidence in them. By the way, I hope you think as much of them as I do."

"They've converted me to that quaint mid-century theory of the origin of life—that it was bottled sunshine."

Hubert's face lit up with pride and pleasure. "They have been a great happiness to me. I want to talk to you intimately about everything, and I want to hear you speak freely. Tell me frankly your impression of my household."

The question caught Preston unprepared, and he did not answer immediately.

"Come, old fellow, don't shirk it," Hubert admonished him.

"I do shirk it," said Preston. "When a man marries he necessarily shuts out even his best friend from a large part of his life. You forget that, Hubert. As for myself, I come, I see, and I go. My affection is not less than of yore, but still there is certain ground I cannot possibly intrude upon in conversation—even at your invitation. Of course I might very easily say that your household is perfectly charming, and I should be speaking the exact truth. But, to say the least, that would be somewhat superficial."

"You are afraid of hurting me by criticism," said Hubert. "You think I have settled down in a commonplace way. I understand your hesitation. I readily admit that our home here is what chiefly occupies my mind at present, but then my responsibility for the others is for me just now the most important thing in the

world. After all one's energies are limited. One has to choose in life, and—one chooses! Once upon a time, as you know, I had altruistic ambitions, hopes that I might be able to do something for the good of my fellows; if not directly by humanitarian work, at least indirectly by writings and political work. But the sea of life is so vast, and the day comes when it dawns upon one somewhat rudely that one's strength is not equal to the demands one would make upon it. I draft and study documents, and write out opinions all day long, and not infrequently all night too. I did sit for some years on a committee or two, and even took classes in Bethnal Green and other districts. But Constance used not to like it—or rather she used to hate it. She used to fret about my having to stop in town after my day's work and my having to go down to Shadwell or Limehouse, as the case might be, and only catching the last train home and arriving near midnight. She always cherished the belief that I went without dining, and then she was sure I'd one day catch small-pox or fever or the Lord knows what horrible disease. So at last I had to give up all that sort of thing. So you see how one drifts into looking back with a sigh on one's past aspirations and finding what consolation one may in giving one's mite. Why, I cannot even manage to read near as much now as I should like. Strangely enough, whenever I do manage to get through a book now-a-days, however much I may have been interested, it has a way of completely fading from my mind after a few days, for all the world just as if it were a brief which I had disposed of in due course. But to return to my question. I have always been looking forward to your taking a sort of brotherly interest in us all, and I confess I did not foresee your reluctance to speak out. You know I was always given to looking life in the face, and I assure you I have not yet learnt to flinch. My wife, whom you scarcely know yet, is, in this respect, even more courageous than I. She is highly gifted, and she is one of those rare women to whom one may talk without circumspection. So we shall both be only too grateful to hear exactly what you think."

Preston had followed him with a slight smile on his face, nodding every now and again in sympathetic comprehension.

"I'll confine myself to one point at present," he contented himself with remarking; "and that is—the worldly aspect of your affairs. I fear you may be overdriven—you who have only your health and work to rely upon."

"Ah, well, no doubt the expenses of a household have a rising tendency," admitted Hubert. "But Constance is the most careful person in the world. In fact she economizes to excess. She would spare herself no pains to save a shilling. The girls, perhaps, do not realize how much she sacrifices for them—they are so used to having things made easy for them. But then that is the privilege of childhood. My marriage has been a great success, greater than I had ever looked forward to. Constance has smoothed things for me immensely."

"I should say she has been finding that an extremely agreeable process," smiled Preston. "She certainly struck me as perfectly happy. She is of a social disposition?"

"I have yet to tell you about her," returned Hubert. "Constance never had a home—at least in the real sense. That is why she loves domesticity and a large circle of friends. She has been so starved of these things that she lives for them now."

At this point Hubert naturally slid into relating the history of his marriage—with a smiling reference, of course, to the accidental part Preston had taken in its promotion. Preston's surprise at the revelation had already been discounted to some extent, but he certainly confessed he would never of himself have succeeded in identifying his friend's wife with the actress Hubert had occasionally gone to visit, and whose marriage, moreover, Hubert had at the time distinctly mentioned to him. Still he listened with his usual impassiveness, speaking only when appealed to. In the course of his recital Hubert exhibited much emotion and occasionally was so shaken that he was forced to pause for awhile. He was as touchingly anxious to enlist Preston's sympathy for Con-

stance's hard case as he was to gain his approval for the marriage itself. But he was most shaken of all when he went on to tell of the imperious opposition his mother had displayed on his writing to her to announce the engagement. Impelled by an almost desperate sense of threatened social degradation, she had immediately employed an inquiry agent to rake up poor Constance's antecedents. Armed with the agent's report, she had burst in on him at the Temple, where she fortunately happened to find him alone, and the scene that followed he would always remember as the most shattering he had ever experienced. Briefly, she had insisted on regarding Constance as a wilfully disreputable person who had disgraced herself and her family, and she had got the idea into her head that the poor girl would be only too delighted to be bought off for a few hundred pounds, which she desired to supply from her own purse—however much she might have to stint herself for the rest of her life. He had in vain maintained that he was about to marry a good and irreproachable woman, who had been cruelly victimized; Mrs. Ruthven took such a view as a proof that he had been cunningly blinded. Argue as he might, they had remained in hopeless conflict, and he should remember to his dying day every word that had passed between them. After her first onslaught had spent itself she had remained for a time in silent misery, but that had been the merest lull in the storm.

"I don't really believe you're going to do this," she had recommenced tremblingly. "It is too horrible to be true."

Then had followed a pretty altercation, ultimately devoid of diplomacy on both sides; Mrs. Ruthven constantly assuming that the social ideals in the light of which this engagement appeared to her an outrage were fully accepted by him, he as constantly disclaiming them, declaring that in any case they could not be applied indiscriminately. But his efforts had proved to no purpose. Never for a moment had she seemed at a loss to continue the struggle, in the calmer intervals of which

she had kept recurring to the notion that Constance was to be bought off for a moderate amount of money, and always with a naïve unshakable confidence in the success of such a measure. It had been more than her dominant idea; it had represented the solid and infallible resource on which her hopes rested. She had at length offered to go to a thousand pounds, if necessary—she would gladly endure every consequent privation, even if she had to go without a rag to her back and scrub her own floors for the rest of her life.

"Come, mother, let us make an end of this painful discussion," he had at last been driven to demand. "It is quite clear we shall never be of the same mind about Miss Powers. I desire this marriage, I am pledged to it, and I mean to carry out my engagement."

Whereupon she had come to him and thrown her arms round him in a last frenzied burst of entreaty.

"I have been a good mother to you all your life," she had sobbed, "and I am a good mother to you now. I would give all I possess, my life itself, to save you from this. I have not a thought for myself, only for the future of my poor boy. My own life is nothing to me; I care only for your life—to see you happy. If you marry that creature, it will kill me."

"When you know her, you will care for her as much as I do."

"God forbid she should have the honour of counting me among her acquaintances."

"If you'd only put a good face on the matter—since it has to be—you'd soon be convinced how splendidly everything's going to turn out."

"Put a good face on the matter!" She had let him go free at last, had even pushed him away. "No! I set my face against it altogether. I had hoped and dreamed for you otherwise—for all my hopes and dreams were for you. I repeat you will kill me if you marry that creature. I am an old woman now, and I am not so strong as I look. I am all broken. Pride holds me. Break my pride and you break me."

He had listened in torture, only too conscious of her

terrible sincerity. And now she had suddenly caught him in her arms again, beseeching him piteously, kissing him tumultuously, and sobbing over him with breaking heart.

"Calm yourself, mother, for heaven's sake. Things are not what they appear to you, believe me."

But she had expended her last reserve of energy.

"Then you are still set on casting off your mother for the sake of a wanton!" she had exclaimed, checking her tears and drawing herself up sternly.

"It is unjust of you to put it that way."

"You don't deny it, you don't deny it," she had exclaimed. "You can't deny it! I have humiliated myself before you quite enough. Marry your wanton then, if you must have her. But remember, you are no longer a son of mine. I wish never to see your face again. One day you will think more tenderly of your mother as she sleeps in her grave, but then it will be too late. I shall pass my few remaining days in the same solitude that has always been my lot." And with that she had stridden out of the room.

Hubert drew a long breath. Preston saw that even now he was trembling with the emotion of the scene through which he had just lived again.

"Even giving you our very words, I have not been able to revive before you more than the ghostliest echo of the actual storm," he resumed presently. "It is a wonder I did not shoot myself in the first fit of despair. Afterwards my source of strength was in the feeling that my conscience was absolutely clear."

In spite of which conviction Hubert looked exceedingly relieved when Preston likewise declared he had nothing to reproach himself with. Evidently he attached the greatest importance to this corroboration of his own judgment. Preston, desiring now to lead his friend's mind gently into less gloomier fields of reflection, guilefully proceeded to point out that the rupture between his mother and himself was to some extent balanced by the attendant reconciliation between Constance and her family. The stratagem was effective, for

Hubert at once took up the theme, gleefully dwelling on the pride with which the Powers now regarded their former scapegrace. Constance had, in fact, become an immense personage in her family, especially since she had married off one of her younger sisters to an excellent young neighbour of theirs.

"Constance has quite a talent for match-making," he added, smiling. "She has remarkable skill. She plays destiny without for a moment impairing her subjects' faith in free-will.

"A heavenly amusement," exclaimed Preston.

Recurring for a moment to his mother's death, Hubert went on to tell how he had been dumfounded at learning the extent of the property she had managed to accumulate. He had always taken it for granted that she had only just enough to live upon in a quiet way, but she had evidently been saving for many years and must have invested her money with the greatest shrewdness. Then, of himself dismissing the subject, Hubert went on to speak of the children—their growth and promise. He had saved up many mementos of their childhood—bits of needlework, crude attempts at drawing and colouring, (including various comic efforts), and old copybooks exhibiting the state of their knowledge in its earlier stages; all of which he brought out and displayed to Preston with an eager pride and interest. Nor were their more recent stages neglected, for Hubert was able to lay his hand on a batch of their latest compositions, which he read out with avidity. Preston certainly derived from them a great deal of amusement, and was especially tickled by the profuse high-minded morality with which May stuffed her sentences, whether criticising the character of some mediæval monarch and the manners of his times, or enlarging to her heart's content on the ideals of a noble life.

"The little puss thinks I like the sort of thing, so she lays it on thick," chuckled Hubert. "However, you will gather from some of these the sort of ideas I endeavour to put into their heads in our informal little talks together. I always insist on simplicity of existence,

combined with personal dignity and high culture. 'Be fit for any sphere,' I am constantly telling them; 'but know how to be happy in a sphere of your own, which will be just as fine or as ignoble as you make it.' I dream of their being content to marry men such as I myself was—you understand, of course, what I mean. A cultivated man, working for his bread, is only welcome in the world as a sort of theatrical supernumerary, to help to fill up the background reputably—at least that is what I learnt in my younger days."

Preston preferred to remain silent. From what he had seen of May he doubted very much whether the society supernumerary (worker or no worker) was likely to be the sort of husband to her taste.

"I suppose you'll be taking a house in town some day—I mean in a few years time." Preston's train of thought went forward, and the words slipped from his lips in spite of himself.

"Such future details I have scarcely considered yet, though I dare say the girls will be getting a little bit tired of the country by then, or at any rate will be feeling the need of a change. The only thing I have really made up my mind about is their going abroad for a year or two later on, though, of course, I should only be able to join them myself for the briefest of intervals. I want them to know the world and to see everything, but I am sure they have too much good sense ever to get spoiled. As you know, my policy is to leave them the widest freedom. I believe in freedom. Let them get their own impressions and feel and think for themselves. At the same time, of course, they must not neglect to hear what other people think."

Preston again refrained from making any comment. As he had said before there were regions where the best of friends might not intrude, especially with a mind to meddle. Besides, who could stem the flood of life?

"And then there's our old friend, Lady Wycliffe," went on Hubert. "She has never ceased to take the greatest interest in my household. She has been unaffectedly charming all along—though she, too, has had

trouble. Ah, you have already heard. The loss of her husband was a terrible blow to her. Since then we have been greater friends than before—though it is true we sometimes lose sight of each other for months at a time. But that has no significance. The children have presents from her regularly on their birthdays, and she never fails to send for them when in the neighbourhood. She perfectly understands my view of their future, and she entirely endorses it. I am sure she will always be a good friend and adviser to them.”

“But her sphere—her set and circle I mean—is not what you have in mind for them,” Preston could not help suggesting, though he almost repented it the next instant.

“Oh, I don’t wish them to be absorbed into her sphere—certainly not,” said Hubert. “Nor is there any likelihood of such a thing. They will simply know her in a quiet and intimate way. I would not have such a true friendship lost. Besides, since her husband’s death, Lady Wycliffe has given up entertaining, and she rarely goes into society. She lives in seclusion and is devoted to her charities. . . . But let us go down into the garden. The air is warm and full of perfume, and the stars are out in multitudes.”

They went down-stairs, and Constance met them in the hall to say “good-night.” Then, happy in the renewal of friendship, they paced to and fro on the lawn in the perfect night, seeking, finding, renewing the old trains of thought, the old discussions, in the new light of the riper and the richer years. Memories, fantasies, and audacities, half-suggestions quickly taken up, shades of soul-expression knit in with the old bond and significant to them alone, confirmed that there had been no loosening, and now and again other lives with which their own had been associated in good-will or friendship mingled in their reunion.

Book V
The Husband

I

PRESTON peered into the dim shop but saw only the bookseller himself busy over his accounts. A big sunbeam, striking slantwise through a gap in the close-packed window, revealed so dust-laden an atmosphere that Preston rejoiced Hubert was not there to inhale it. Yet he was himself tempted to enter and to glance along one or two of the shelves. A sort of archway divided the shop in the middle, and as, taking down a volume here and there, he gradually worked his way towards it, he fancied he heard vague shufflings and movements in the division beyond. Suddenly there was a strange premonitory noise; then followed immediately the crash of a veritable avalanche. The bookseller came rushing forward.

The actual catastrophe was, however, less alarming than its mode of announcing itself. Hubert, browsing high up on a ladder, had had the misfortune to overthrow a gigantic pile of volumes, and Preston, to his amused astonishment, found his friend looking guiltily down at the chaos on the floor. The region here beyond the archway was unexpectedly lofty, with a grimy top light through which the sunshine filtered. Hubert on his perch had been quite hidden from view.

Smilingly reassuring, the bookseller set to work to repair the mischief. Hubert, beating the dust from his hands and coat, came down the ladder with a rueful countenance.

"I felt it was going to happen," he said. "There was a moment of horrible suspense. I'm glad it's over." They laughed as their grimy hands met. "But what are you doing here?"

"Looking for you, of course," said Preston; "though,

for a moment, I really thought you must have found your way home after all."

"The deuce!" cried Hubert, glancing at his watch. "I've been fooling away more than two hours. I can't possibly be in time for the ceremony."

"They were worrying about you at lunch, so I hurried off to fetch you, making straight for this new temple of bargains. I was confident of finding you at your devotions. You see I know my man."

Hubert smiled, though really vexed with himself. He had so carefully arranged to have the afternoon free—since May had insisted he must come with them to her friend's wedding; and now the others must be content to pick him up on their way to the reception.

He settled with the bookseller, and presently the two men were being driven away from the region of the Law Courts, the hansom soon emerging into Oxford-street and going westward at a brisk rate. Preston confided to Hubert that he had won a bet by his sure instinct as to his whereabouts, May being the loser. She had so impressed on Hubert the necessity of coming straight home to lunch that she was certain some unforeseen piece of business had detained him. She had, therefore, not hesitated to enter on the speculation.

"I knew I was bound to win," chuckled Preston. "These clever people of nineteen do not realize how stereotyped they'll be at forty-seven."

"Yes," said Hubert musingly. "I am getting perilously near fifty, and I seem to have flitted through all those decades like a shadow. All is vanity."

He sighed. His face was naturally sad for all its sweetness, his hair was greying rapidly, and his forehead showed lines. There were lines, too, about his mouth—severe, pure, cloistral; whilst his deep eyes, full of brilliance, accentuated the pallor that gave a further monastic distinction to his features. He had been growing thinner of late, and his long frock-coat seemed to sit loosely on him.

"Your reflections are distinctly inappropriate *en route* to a wedding," suggested Preston.

"You need have no fears as to the sort of figure I shall cut," laughed Hubert. "I shall be careful to dissimulate my sadness. I am not inexperienced at that."

Preston looked thoughtful. "Oh, well, *I* shall have to try to amuse you—I'll be looking in at Rutland Gate myself later on."

"I shall certainly appreciate your attentions. You know how these functions bore me. I generally surrender myself to the inward contemplation."

"I promise you that you shall not go to sleep to-day—with such material about to stimulate me. The most pompous people in London converge to the Roburnes. I'm always wondering, by the way, how it is that that May of yours, with her intelligence, chooses to be so thick with a family of that kind."

"I know the people only in the most superficial way," said Hubert almost apologetically. "Besides, May and her friendships have long since passed out of my little personal horizon," he added with a laugh.

"Lady Wycliffe remains the same indiscriminating enthusiast as ever. Fancy two such pets as May Ruthven and Lady Florence!"

"She is responsible, I should say, for most of May's friendships," said Hubert smilingly; "but, as you know, I leave May perfectly free."

Preston laughed, observing that there was hardly any alternative policy. He was certain he should never have the pluck to try to influence her, even though they were terrific friends, and he ranked among the few people who were not her inferiors.

Hubert made some indulgent remark about high-spirited youth.

"Sometimes it wants diluting down a bit," suggested Preston. "And there's the brother, young Arthur Roburne—Skeffington's personal secretary—the very part he's cut out for! The youngster has ambitions, but I fancy he'll end pretty much as he began, and, at the most, look back on a creditable career of under-secretaryship. The old earl, however unpopular he may be, has at least character, but the son represents

a woeful degeneration. The prig has the assurance to put on his airs with me. You know the sort of young man—the chilly omniscient person who talks the stock political platitudes in the longest words."

Hubert's thoughts travelled back very far. He had a vision of a shy lad, fresh from Eton, holding forth to Preston blushing, yet with evident self-satisfaction. He had never supposed then that this boy's sister was destined to become May's bosom friend, and that he himself should one day be bidden to her wedding. But then life was full of these amusing irrelevant developments!

"One of the most proper young men Balliol ever turned out!" pursued Preston. "But time enough for me to be spiteful afterwards. Your folk were all fearfully excited about the wedding. Here we are at Oxford Circus. See you later then. *Au revoir!*"

Preston jumped off. The hansom turned up Portland Place, and a minute later Hubert stood on his own doorstep.

The house was a great corner one, as plain and dull externally as its neighbours all about. As Hubert turned the latch and stepped into the hall, a listlessness came over him. Besides engaging himself to accompany the others to the Roburne wedding, he had promised to join in one or two calls afterwards, but he felt no pleasure at the afternoon's prospect. The occupations that afforded them so much happiness had little savour for him, did not even interest him. This fashionable residence, which another might have regarded with unctuous self-satisfaction as the symbol of a successful career, was merely a constant reminder to Hubert that all his old ideals of life had somehow miscarried!

It was their second season in London, and the girls were important persons now. How swiftly the last half-dozen years had sped! And as for their settling in town—why that seemed only the other day! He remembered well the evening of May's first formal party, how when she had come down ready dressed for departure, he had meant to offer her a little friendly

counsel. But she had made a *moue*. "Now, please, don't be an old parson, uncle," she had exclaimed, kissing him. Then, sylphlike, she had flashed away. He had laughed in spite of himself, called himself a solemn old fogey. Eighteen months had already gone since then, and their abandoned house in the country (which Hubert had been tempted to buy shortly after his marriage) had stood empty all the time. It was one of his few bad investments, for never a possible tenant had appeared.

Their present mode of life astonished him every time he grasped it. And yet the chain of events that had led up to it was clear enough.

He had sent the girls abroad as soon as they were old enough to travel—with Constance, of course, to accompany them. As they wished to become expert linguists, and as there was no urgency for them to return to England, their leisurely progression through the Continent had extended over two years. Hubert, in view of the incalculable benefit of this experience to the girls, was perfectly content to be left alone at home, especially as he was able to join them, wherever they happened to be, in the intervals of the law terms—the many weeks of the long vacation making amends for the few days of the minor vacations.

Their time, indeed, was well occupied; whether they were making long sojourns at Paris, Munich, Rome, or Florence, or alternating these wonderful cities with Swiss lakes and Provençal vineyards and Normandy orchards. May appeared to be taking art seriously, even spending a good deal of time in the schools, and Gwenny did not neglect her music. Naturally they rummaged a great deal for treasures and bargains in out-of-the-way corners, sending home, too, many a bulky acquisition. And in the summer they would bask in the sunshine at little sea-side places, far from the beaten track of the tourist. Transient friendships, that at least left pleasant memories, came to them everywhere, and there were always people with whom to interchange mild hospitalities and go shopping and sight-seeing.

And when at last they set foot in England again, it

was with a high consciousness of being very different persons from the unsophisticated trio, who, landing at Calais for the first time, had interrogated porters in uncouth French. They found, in fact, they had quite outgrown the old life.

And, indeed, it had soon become apparent that they could not settle down in the old grooves. The girls, interested in having the world unfold before them, could not suddenly have it shut out at their age. Youth, as Hubert indulgently reflected, must ever have something in prospect—especially youth that is splendidly buoyant, splendidly beautiful, and splendidly loved. May's longing—for May, exuberant in desires, always took the lead in longing—was now to live in London; and Constance, once the subject was mooted, made no concealment that such a prospect was distinctly inviting to her. Even Gwenny vibrated to the mysterious beckoning of the capital. To occupy a house in town seemed an adventure full of romantic possibilities. They wished to feel London as they had felt other great capitals, with the added zest of being a real part of the life as well as spectators of it.

As they had already a sufficient nucleus of friends in town, they would not be entirely outsiders; and this nucleus, moreover, was of an easily expansible nature.

But such aspects of the idea were, of course, more present to the minds of the returned wanderers than to that of Hubert, who was busily engaged in overworking most of the time, with his books for his sole distraction. He himself was naturally pained at the idea of giving up the home in which he had spent the happiest years of his life, for, in spite of unexpected luck of late with some of his investments, he still could not afford to maintain it in addition to a residence in London. He was careful, however, not to let his own emotions enter into the family councils. How could he do otherwise in face of their irrepressible zest in existence!

He gave his sanction without uneasiness. He had faith in those he loved. So far as he looked forward, it was with the hope that, if London offered a wider field

of interests and pleasures, it would equally offer a wider field of inspiration and a wider appeal to their sympathies.

But once the initial step had been taken, he had scarcely been able to influence the march of events. Their London friends had rallied round them, and Lady Wycliffe (who, since her husband's death, had occupied a simpler house in Arlington Street) had enthusiastically taken them under her special wing, and, in spite of her semi-retirement from the world, she had contrived to launch Constance and the girls into a fashionable whirlpool before Hubert had fairly realized how matters were shaping themselves. When at last he came to ponder over and to face the facts, he began to recognize that the years of their Continental residence had effected a gap in his relations with the others which he had never contemplated. Since their return they had never resumed the old footing. It began to dawn upon him that his mental leadership was somehow a thing of the past. They were independent entities, proud individualities, not only generating their own criticism, but capable of turning it on him! Each now had her secrets, her private correspondence, her personal thoughts and emotions. He felt as if a wall had been built against him. There was not even superficially the same intimacy as of old.

Their first house in London had been on a far more moderate scale than their present one, but Constance had found it unsuitable for social purposes. And when, ultimately, her longing to give a large party was thwarted by the smallness of her drawing-room, she had set herself to scan the advertisement columns of *The Morning Post*, with the result that, in the winter, they had shifted their quarters again. Constance had obtained this "eligible mansion" in Portland Place as a special bargain, taking over the remainder of a short lease from the estate of a bankrupt bullion-broker, and confidently calculating to be able to maintain it by clever management (seeing they were so small a family) with only a slight increase of their normal expenditure. Hubert did not even go to look at the house; he needed only a

corner for himself, and was content to take possession of that whenever it should be allotted to him.

And so their second season was now in full swing. Expenditure, in spite of all calculations, had heavily increased. Hubert signed all cheques with an almost mechanical indifference, and resumed his unceasing labours. Meanwhile he had been losing touch more and more with the details of their existence. Their by now vast circle of friends were for the most part strangers to him, and he neither knew nor saw what exactly they were doing from day to day. Constance was entirely absorbed in this new life, and had now at last ventured to send out cards for the ambitious party she had long dreamed of.

II

A MESSAGE awaited Hubert that May would return for him after the ceremony. As he had forgotten to lunch, he was not displeased at the respite. The house at its corner faced east and north, so that even at that early hour the rooms were already sunless. Hubert had a fancy that, at the best of times, a dimness brooded over the immediate locality, and he found it particularly cheerless now to be eating alone in the sombre dining-room, through whose ugly plate-glass windows, giving on streets on two sides, came a tarnished London light. There was not even the compensation of shady coolness, for the air was close and stifling everywhere. He hurried from the table as soon as possible, and, by the time he had made himself presentable, was informed that May was waiting for him in the drawing-room.

And there he found her standing in one of the windows between the green arras-like hangings, and staring at the dull brick stretch of respectable mansions on the opposite side of the street. She was all in white—her summer dress was of the daintiest, and her hat coquettishly trimmed with roses and black velvet. Her beauty dazzled him. It seemed to him almost too exquisite for reality, and the deep tenderness with which he was stirred at the sight of her had mingled in it something of the worship of a lover in his first flood of romance. Such discontent and vague unhappiness as had been troubling him were at once charmed away; it seemed a great thing that the world should contain so wonderful and so happy a creature!

He stole across the great room softly, picking his way amid the Louis Treize arm-chairs covered with faded

brocade, and old cedar and tulip-wood tables laden with quaint silver and bibelots. As he could not take his eye off her, he was fortunate in getting over to her without misadventure. And yet, despite all the important brilliance of her presence, she was the same child he had taken away from the northern suburb so many years before, had always been that tiny person. The princess into which she had bloomed was a perennial surprise for him, and he had often a bewildering double sense of her identity. After a period of hesitation, she had had a spurt of growth, but in the end she had just missed being tall. Hubert would not for worlds have had a single inch of difference—whether more or less—in her height.

For some obscure reason, she seemed greatly fascinated just then by the row of opposite houses, and so did not hear Hubert approaching. When at last he called her by name, she turned with a start.

"You must forgive my unpunctuality. I feel very guilty," he murmured.

She came close to him, and, putting her long arms round his neck, ensnared his soul with her wonderful smiling eyes.

"On one condition—that you've not been discovered at that wretched book-shop."

"I'm sorry, but I've lost you your bet."

"Then I forgive you without conditions." Her voice was sweet with reassurance. She held her eyes fixed on his a moment longer, then suddenly tiptoed up and gave him the kiss her tantalizing attitude had kept promising. Already the afternoon's prospect had become more attractive to Hubert. Usually he had to be content to see her lose herself in the brilliant life that charmed her away from him; for once he would have her near him for a whole afternoon!

She reminded him that the carriage was waiting, so they descended immediately.

"So I've lost my bet," she sighed, as they drove off. "Dear old father Preston—I like him so much! Only I confess I'm a wee bit afraid of him. He's much too deep

for a child like me. He's perfectly uncanny sometimes—I believe he knows exactly what is going to happen to every one of us."

"It looks uncommonly as if he does—to judge by to-day's experience."

May considered for a brief moment, as was her habit.

"I wonder why he hasn't married!" she said abruptly.

"I should say he is best able to answer that question himself."

"I have tried to make him, but no one knows better than he how to avoid answering. I suppose his queer ideas have a good deal to do with it. I know he has queer ideas, though they only peep out when it pleases him to puzzle me. Now, to tell the truth, I'm beginning to lose patience with him. Fancy allowing a set of ideas to make one's life miserable—for I'm sure the poor old thing *is* miserable. If I were he, I should take care to get rid of the ideas very soon."

"I don't think he'd give up his ideas—if that were to make him even as happy as you," said Hubert. "That's one of his ideas, and an important one."

"It would be interesting to be in church and watch him being married," smiled May, flying along, yet deftly evading the threatened subtleties. "I couldn't help imagining him in Major Bellows' place to-day. Major Bellows was almost irritatingly calm. But poor Flo went through the ideal rather badly. She burst into tears at the most solemn moment, and her aunt had to lift up the veil and dry her eyes for her. I was so sorry about it, but I never should have thought Flo likely to break down in that way."

And, once started about the wedding, May had much to relate about the bride and the bridegroom, and the two families thus allied. But Hubert's interest in these apparently remarkable people was of the mildest. In truth he was a little disappointed that the ground of their conversation should have shifted just when it had become promising. He was confident the love between them was as perfect as it had ever been; but, even as he listened to all this superficial chatter, he

wondered more and more what were the real workings of this quick brain in its more earnest moments, what were the ideas she had been forming for herself as the result of her later experiences.

Soon, however, he found himself listening with a shade more interest in the members of the Roburne family. Close friends as they were of May's, his own acquaintance with them was, as he had told Preston, of the slightest. But, in view of his meeting them again, the girl's talk was informing. The bride, who had been left motherless many years since, had long been chaperoned by her aunt, Lady Farrow, at whose house in Rutland Gate the wedding presents were being exhibited and the reception held. Arthur Roburne, the younger of Lady Florence's brothers, was, by a family arrangement, quartered with his chief at Eaton Square, whilst "Charlie," the heir, had a taste for soldiering, and was now in Egypt. The father had had to come up specially for the wedding, for he seldom left his Yorkshire home now. Hubert did not suppose that the old earl would have the least recollection of their meeting at the same table some dozen years back, but with the son Arthur he had already on one or two occasions interchanged a few words, as when, somewhat absent-mindedly, Hubert had wandered into the drawing-room on Constance's "at home" day. May did not seem at all disinclined to talk about the young man, who, Hubert learned, had of late been spending a good deal of his spare time at his aunt's, whereas at one time he had rather avoided Rutland Gate.

"Once upon a time, I knew of his existence only from Flo's talk. She used to talk about him an enormous deal."

"And now I suppose you hear him at first hand on the same subject," said Hubert, with incautious gaiety, remembering Preston's estimate of the Honourable Arthur Roburne.

He was surprised to see May reddening. Moments of such confusion were rare with her.

"If Mr. Roburne chooses to honour me with his confi-

dence, there is no reason why I shouldn't be civil enough to listen. I suppose somebody has been gossiping." She seemed indignant, overlooking that Hubert had spoken quite at random.

"Gossiping!" he echoed. "What a notion! I was only afraid the fellow was inflicting himself on you." He was still thinking of the egotistic young man whom Preston had painted.

"The fellow inflict himself on me!" May laughed uneasily. "Poor Mr. Roburne!"

"I understood he was conceited," murmured Hubert, conscious of having got himself into trouble.

"Was there ever a young man whom somebody or other didn't think conceited? Why, you scarcely know Mr. Roburne. . . . It really isn't fair to make up your mind about anybody in that prejudiced way!"

"Of course it isn't! You make me feel ashamed of myself."

May was silent. She seemed agitated in spite of herself. Hubert was really sorry for his slight disparagement of Mr. Arthur Roburne; he could not bear to have occasioned her the least vexation, even though unwittingly. "How loyal she is to her friends!" he thought with pride.

But soon she resumed her talk as unconcerned as though she had never had a moment of embarrassment. She only stopped as they were passing along Knightsbridge, remembering suddenly she had promised Constance to call *en route* on two sisters, who were giving a concert that evening, to which they were all going, and who, moreover, were to sing at the Ruthven's party on the following Wednesday.

She insisted on Hubert's accompanying her, and led him down an unexpected *impasse* at the end of which she rang the bell of a tiny brick house. This proved to be a very quaint sort of place, unexpectedly amusing, and, as Hubert ascended the stairway, he had the sensation of at once examining a doll's house through a magnifying-glass, and of exploring the interior. There was just one room on each floor, with windows at the

back that overlooked the full bustle of Park Lane, and the miniature drawing-room into which they were ushered might have been a virtuoso's showroom, so crowded was it with daintily-filled cabinets, and brocade-covered chairs, and the sweetest of old china, and ancient musical instruments, and exquisitely chiselled candlesticks. Presently the two sisters Godfrey came bounding into the room—wonderful creatures with flaming gold hair and dazzlingly fair complexions. They welcomed their visitors with loud ringing voices, expressively accompanied by movements of very brilliant blue eyes that were incredibly enormous. Despite all the warmth of their greeting, their large, interesting features had yet a strange suggestion of coldness; they looked, indeed, as if they had just leapt out of one of those pictures in a high key, where the paint, despite all the dazzle, remains coldly unreal.

Constance's message was soon delivered, the sisters offered tea, which was refused, and then all spoke about the wedding—in which the Misses Godfrey seemed ardently interested, though not acquaintances of the Roburne family. Hubert, who naturally took little part in the conversation, sat waiting good-humouredly. How full of the joy of life were all three girls! What an eagerness for pleasures and happy experiences radiated from them!

Soon the visit had to be cut short, and Hubert and May continued their drive amid the sea of smart equipages, ultimately skirting the Park that lay green and pleasant in the sunshine, and taking their place in the long procession of carriages that were moving forward to deposit their occupants at Lady Farrow's door-step.

As they made their way between the rows of lackeys and passed down the palm-lined hall, a murmur of music came to them from a distant conservatory. The air was scented by great heaps of roses, whose profusion amid appropriate greenery all but succeeded in giving the conventional London interior something of a romantic aspect. The assemblage in the drawing-room, too, had undoubtedly its picturesque points, what with the poeti-

cally veiled bride, resplendent in white satin and orange-blossoms, the little pages in mauve costumes, and the bridesmaids with their beautiful bouquets flitting about everywhere. Lady Florence was effusively affectionate towards May, as if eagerly welcoming so legitimate an opportunity of occupying her attention naturally. Though she was finely built, her features were of a somewhat masculine cast—she bore a curious resemblance to her brother—and she was evidently several years older than May Ruthven. But she had always been a shy and backward girl, and even now was scarcely on May's level of engaging self-confidence. Her husband, Major Bellows, was certainly a handsome fellow, and he stood near at hand smiling at nobody in particular.

Lady Farrow, a plumper edition of her niece, looking remarkably fresh in her velvet gown though she was well over fifty, welcomed Hubert with great amiability, and presently passed him on to her brother, whom he had recognized at once on entering the room. The earl had apparently changed very little since the last—and first—time Hubert had seen him. His gnarled and stern features were somewhat chastened by years, though they now exhibited a set expression of agony. He had always been a man of autocratic temper, passionately imperious, and had throughout life quarrelled with his colleagues in every capacity of public usefulness in which he had attempted to engage. Living in retirement now, he was dreaded by everybody about him, and was growing more and more difficult as gout and rheumatisms tormented his old age. Yet his courtesy to strangers was proverbial.

He eyed Hubert searchingly as Lady Farrow mentioned his name, and, retaining his hand for a moment with great cordiality, presently recalled the fact of their previous meeting—to Hubert's unconcealed surprise. "I never forget a face," the earl went on to proclaim with an almost childish pride, and he was ready with many other remarkable instances of this infallible power of his. He spoke with a peculiar dry intonation, gruff, yet not unpleasant, articulating with his lips almost closed.

Clearly he was greatly pleased with himself at his ability to astonish his listener repeatedly. Ultimately, under cover of the amazement caused by one of the most remarkable of these mnemonic achievements, he broke off to welcome an ascetic-looking bishop, and, with an air of addressing both, felicitated himself and them on the charming weather that had come so suddenly with June. When he had left the country but a fortnight before, the summer had been sadly behindhand and large roaring fires had been the rule. In his own lifetime the climate of England had certainly been changing, for of late years the heat-wave had come upon them without warning.

Presently Hubert found himself subtly dismissed, so he moved away and glanced round to see what had become of May. In a moment he caught sight of her some distance away talking to three young men of varying types but uniform tailoring; yet nodding and bowing at the same time to other friends in the crowd. Constance and Gwenny were not to be seen at all. As Hubert knew absolutely nobody here, he occupied himself watching May's doings, and wondering who these men were and on what exact footing they stood with her. Here was she in the very heart of that life which claimed her most of the time, and, now that he had followed her for once, he could understand not a jot of what was proceeding, of what were her vivid interests, her true feelings, the degree of her friendship for all these people. Finally he began to wish Preston would arrive and entertain him with the promised malicious interpretation of the assembly.

A great many slow minutes went by. May had flitted all over the room by now, and at present was being greeted by two elderly men who looked as if they might be colonels. Then, as Hubert turned his head again, he saw Constance and Gwenny just entering the room in tow of Mr. Arthur Roburne himself. In thus averting his eyes from the direction of May, who caught sight of the others about the same time, Hubert failed to observe the slight change that came over her face.

His attention was, however, again diverted just then,

for he was suddenly aware that somebody at his side was trying to speak to him.

"I suppose you don't remember me, Mr. Ruthven!"

The speaker was a very graceful, sweet-voiced woman of about thirty-five, whose good looks were slightly on the wane, the corners of her mouth having that drawn appearance which is associated with perennial sadness. Hubert, as she had surmised, was quite at a loss to recall her, and found himself envying the earl his memory. Despite her tolerant smile at his hesitation, he experienced some slight embarrassment, the more so as she struck him immediately as a very charming person, and he felt he really had met her before somewhere.

"We met ever so long ago—more years than I care to think of," she said, with a flash of gaiety in her manner that also seemed to him strangely familiar. "I am Mrs. Holbrook—I used to be Miss Hardyng in those days."

It was as if a wizard's wand had touched her. She stood at once transformed before him, and he saw her again as the fresh, sprightly girl who had been placed beside him with—as had afterwards transpired—delightfully futile intention. He had often remembered that little episode with a smile that was sometimes pitiful, sometimes of mere amusement.

"Ah, yes!" he exclaimed. "You had made up your mind to be happy, and to let nothing throughout life interfere with that determination. I have often thought of you."

She flushed, then gave a little laugh. "I was an awful little goose. What a number of foolish things I must have said to you! But how strange we should never have met since!"

"As I explained to you then, I do not exactly belong to your world," he smiled.

"I envy you," she smiled back. "Still I confess I should have liked to know you better—I remember how I enjoyed our talk that evening."

"You are very kind," he murmured.

"I really did," she assured him. "Only I felt terribly timid, though, of course, I pretended not to be. It's a

great pleasure to confess things years afterwards when one can afford to laugh at them." She nodded just then to some one who had been trying to catch her eye. "I'm sorry, but I have to go on now," she added, with an air of affable conclusion. She drew herself up, and frigidly held the tips of her fingers to him. "Good-bye!"

Though she was still smiling kindly, yet, in that moment, she seemed to relapse into a fashionable frigidity of demeanour that almost seemed to repudiate the more human person who had just been speaking to him.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Holbrook," he returned. She nodded again as she moved away, and Hubert bowed in acknowledgment.

In the meanwhile, Constance and Gwenny had been seized upon by a couple of stately matrons—who were sisters, with comic obviousness—so that Arthur Roburne was left free to gravitate to May. Like his father, the young man was well set up, and he had the family features in a marked degree. He was of fair complexion with a tinge of colour in his cheeks, his hair and moustache were blonde, and he spoke with the least touch of a drawl. He gave the impression of energy well under control, carrying his perfectly-groomed self with a certain decision of movement.

"I have just been helping your aunt and sister to see the presents, Miss Ruthven," he explained as he greeted her, letting his lips part in a careful smile. "I believe I have greatly distinguished myself, and I hope you will give me the chance of doing so further."

May listened, as was her usual way, with the gravest of expressions, letting her large grey eyes rest on him attentively. She never indulged in superfluous movements of her features; they were best in repose, and needed no trick to show them off. Her manner, too, was free from decoration. People spoke of her "pretty ways," yet would have been perplexed to indicate in what these "ways" consisted.

She thanked Roburne for his suggestion, and took his

arm without any hesitation, giving a swift smile and a gracious nod by way of excuse to the two elderly men with whom she had been more or less in conversation.

"As you may well believe, Miss Ruthven," he resumed, as they picked their way down-stairs, "the last fortnight has been pressing heavily on me. Skeffington has an unconscious way of working a man for all he's worth, and the pressure of business is as usual reflected at Eaton Square—to say nothing of the thousands of correspondents who are always finding some excuse for writing. I've been caught, in fact, between two tempests. Skeffington was hard put to it to manage without me this afternoon. Of course he could find plenty of mechanical substitutes, but it's the special knowledge and experience that count. So I had to promise him to slip away immediately after dinner, and make an all-night sitting of it."

"You are a big, strong fellow, so I'm not going to waste any sympathy on you. It would have been too hard on Flo not to have had at least one of her brothers at her wedding."

"Yes. What with Charlie away in Egypt, and Skeffington nigger-driving in that bland way of his, Flo was well-nigh reduced to brotherlessness as—as well as to tears."

"You ought not to be so unkind." The reproach was tempered by the subtle friendly modulation of her voice.

"I am quite good," he declared. "Charlie would have chaffed her unmercifully. Why, I've not said a word about it in her hearing. Here we are, though. What shall we look at first?"

The room was filled, all round its sides and down the centre, with a great display of glittering objects. There were few people in the room just at the moment, and those had almost the air of visitors to a museum as they bent over the exhibits or read on the affixed cards the expressions of the overflowing affection for the newly-wedded couple of which the gifts were merely trifling and inadequate symbols. Roburne and May made their

way across the room and came to a stand by one of the windows, attracted for an instant by the cool foliage of the far-stretching Park without. Near them was a queer-looking, broad-shouldered giant, with laughing big flat features; his head bald at the top, but with long hair hanging straight down all round till it curled up at the ends, and his back presenting an immense stretch of broadcloth with great flaps. He was inspecting a curious old Brittany *pétrin*, evidently bewildered as to the nature of the object, for he was staring at it and chuckling alternately. In marked contrast, a few feet away from them, a beautifully-dressed couple, almost theatrically fashionable-looking, were examining things with cold, well-bred aloofness; the woman with stiff, straight back and tortoise-shell lorgnette, the man with hair splendidly dashed with grey, and all aglow with health and fine linen. Rustling figures scattered all about supplemented these more definite ones, and, fountain-like, kept playing out into echoes of "how sweet!" "how pretty!" "how sweetly pretty!"

"Now where had we best begin?" Arthur Roburne asked again.

"I put myself entirely in your hands," answered May, in charming surrender of her will to his. "Have you not already greatly distinguished yourself at that sort of thing?" she added after the slightest of pauses.

"Oh, please don't laugh at me," he begged; "it makes me feel so nervous. Do you like these Louis Seize candlesticks, Miss Ruthven? They say Louis Seize is a good period to collect. These, of course, aren't genuine, though they look almost as well as if they were. But it's the identity of a thing that counts. Oh, I say, Miss Ruthven, it's really charming, you know, to be getting a chat with you again—after being fagged to death for a whole week and hardly getting a glimpse of you."

"It's too bad to have to fag like that," she murmured, her voice vibrating with indignant concern. "I'd rebel against it, if I were you. How strange! The tops of these candlesticks are made to come off!"

"Yes, that's what they call the *bobèches*," he explained. "But I didn't mean to suggest that I shirk hard work. Being only Arthur, and not Charlie, I have to take my profession seriously; and, in political life, there's nothing like beginning at the foot of the ladder and learning the business thoroughly. In a way I've been enormously lucky to have had Skeffington take me up. With my ambition, I could scarcely have made a better beginning."

She had listened to him, all whilst further examining the candlesticks, with serene yet attentive countenance. "Yes, Flo has often told me how ambitious you are," she chimed in; "that you mean to be Prime Minister one of these days."

Roburne blushed like an awkward school-boy. "I'm afraid Flo somewhat exaggerates," he stammered, as if on his defence. "To listen to her you'd imagine I had the most awful swelled head, whereas I am only anxious to do my best in the hope of making a name. A man may frankly look forward to honourable achievement and yet be a good fellow—don't you think so, Miss Ruthven?"

"Certainly," she admitted. "I can't understand a man *not* being ambitious. If he isn't, he must be either a fool or a philosopher. The fool isn't worth discussing, and the philosopher, I confess, is quite beyond my intellect. But I'm sure Flo never meant to be indiscreet. She is genuinely enthusiastic about you." She moved away from the candlesticks.

The young man looked up and observed with dismay that people had suddenly begun swarming into the room.

"I've a bright idea, Miss Ruthven—to wit, a cup of tea! It's really such a bore to be elbowed about, and the multitude's only beginning to show itself. So please let me off now. I do want to talk to you a little, and you must admit I have been unfortunate of late."

"I shall be grateful for the cup of tea," she said graciously. "But I'm afraid there won't be much of a chat—we have to go on."

He made a wry face, and she took his arm again, laughing frankly at his discomfort.

"Well, you must make it up to me on Thursday when I am bringing my aunt to your aunt's party. You'll scarcely be going on elsewhere then, and I shall have you at bay."

"Ah, but your Skeffington is coming—have you forgotten? Did we not receive his gracious reply in *your* own hand-writing! What if he has you at bay? I mean—gets you into a corner and dictates letters or something of the kind!" she pursued mischievously.

"He's taskmaster enough for that," murmured Roburne uneasily, half to himself.

In the tea-room, however, they found another crowd, mainly women, nibbling sandwiches or eating strawberries and cream, with just a sprinkling of frock-coated males who stood amongst them chatting sociably and skilfully balancing their cups. Presently May and her companion discerned Preston in that very attitude and engaged in discoursing to Gwenny, who, seated in a corner, had been hidden from their view as they entered the room. Gwenny wore a green dress with dark facings, and a charming Leghorn hat. Her hair was arranged *à la vierge*, and, though largely concealed by the hat, still harmonized prettily with her features. As usual, she was pale and ethereal-looking, and her face was turned up to Preston's with half-shy, attentive eyes. And just a few feet away sat Lady Wycliffe and Hubert! Roburne did not feel quite so pleased as he tried to look, especially as he saw Lady Wycliffe's face rest on his companion's with a smile that suggested the girl should come to her.

Though she was advancing in years, the change in Lady Wycliffe's appearance was, apparently, of the slightest. As of yore, she wore her white hair high above her thoughtful forehead, and there was the same sweet expression about her eyes and mouth. But the softly-faded face was marked by an infinity of lines that spoke of doubtful health and pain bravely endured. Her voice, too, had grown more subdued.

She took May by both hands. "I have just been doing my best to entice our Hubert from his family

circle for once," she explained with a winning smile; "and he has promised to lunch with me on Sunday—not to be entertained, but just for a friendly talk with a not very clever old woman. Now, little birdie, I want you to come, too—I have been shamefully neglected by both of you of late. Of course I know my house is the dullest in London for a high-spirited child who likes a romp, but I hear you've been going about a great deal of late, and perhaps a few quiet hours may not be entirely unwelcome."

"Dear Lady Wycliffe!" said the girl, her eyes full of soft witchery as she returned the caressing pressure of the hands that still held hers. "You know how happy it always makes me to be near you!" May felt the hands close on hers tighter than ever now.

Roburne brought May her tea at this moment, and Lady Wycliffe had the benevolent idea of extending an invitation to him as well. "It will make a charming quartette!" she urged, with a touch of girlish joyousness in her voice.

Roburne eagerly accepted, feeling largely consoled for the loss of his *tête-à-tête*.

As soon as they had seen the bride and bridegroom drive off, about an hour later, the Ruthvens re-assembled and went off to finish their afternoon at a garden-party in Kensington.

The girls were somewhat silent as they drove along, as if the wedding had stimulated them to mystic reflection on the human destiny; but Constance, the excitement of the same event mingling with the excitement of her own coming party (for which preparations were by now well advanced), made ample amends for their silence. She appeared to have a marvellously exact recollection of all the presents—to which she was a catalogue and descriptive guide in one. She enumerated the things of which there had been duplicates, and indicated how Lady Florence might make mutually advantageous exchanges with one of her friends who had been married shortly before, and of whose duplicated presents an accurate record likewise existed in Constance's mind.

III

ON the Saturday following, Hubert was able to leave his chambers with the rare sensation of a complete respite from his labours. On arriving home, however, he remembered he had to lunch in solitude, the others having gone off early in the morning to join a river-party at Twickenham. So he rose from the table immediately after eating, and went across the hall to his own sanctum, with the intention of skimming the newspapers or toying with a book, as the mood of the moment might dictate.

The sanctum was a comfortable one, though it conveyed an excessive suggestion of solid respectability. It had a large oak work-table, and a red-and-blue Eastern carpet, and great bookcases lining the walls, and roomy arm-chairs.

Hubert could not settle down at once, but found himself pacing about with a curious sense of having wandered into somebody else's home. True, all these books, arranged in such immaculate lines behind the beautiful glass panels, were the very ones his own hand had so patiently and lovingly collected. Yet none the less did they seem absorbed into the general alien atmosphere, of which he was as conscious here as everywhere in the house. He thought with a sigh of the charming, disorderly study of long ago, from which he had so often stepped out on to the lawn on soft summer evenings, when the children's long day of happiness had been crowned by the deepest of slumbers.

Finally he dropped into a chair, and passed his hand across his face despondently. The household weighed on him ; he regretted their migration to London.

But, unwilling to abandon himself to the unpleasant thoughts that besieged him, he presently tried to find some little distraction in the batch of papers and magazines that lay on his table. He was fortunate enough to chance on one or two articles that had some interest for him, and he read steadily for half-an-hour or so. Then, taking up a weekly society paper at random, he stumbled across a long account of the Bellows-Roburne wedding. Although in the intervening few days he had not escaped hearing much of the brilliance of the crowd which he himself had looked upon so indifferently, the description of the whole affair was certainly surprising. The magnificence of the occasion flashed and scintillated, shone richly at him from the printed words, with a riot of grandeur and colour his innocent eye had never suspected in the living assemblage. *He* had been aware of a multitude of well-dressed people, of bride and bridesmaids and pages, had drunk a bad cup of tea, had conversed a little with his friends. And that corresponded with this dazzling fairy tale!

He could not help smiling at the picture of the bride standing erect amid the throng of the great and noble, a stately creature of "fair golden hair and sweet features" in full panoply of white satin and orange blossoms, of chiffon and point d'Alencon and seed pearls, of sweeping train and Brussels lace veil fastened with a crescent of sapphires and diamonds. He had a vision of Lady Farrow disarranging this veil, and wiping the tearful eyes with a dainty kerchief—suppressed though the incident had been by the chronicler!

He threw down the paper and pushed the whole heap further away from him. He could not read any more. His thoughts went back to his own womenfolk. If he had not been interested in obtaining a complete view of one of their days, a whole page out of the diary of their existence, his taste of their social round the other afternoon would have left him cold and indifferent. For months and months now he had struggled against his bitterly clear perception that they had thrown themselves

heart and soul into a wholly worldly existence (involving the maintenance of an ever-growing luxury), and were devoting every available minute of their time to pleasure, pleasure, pleasure—pursuing it with a thoughtless feverishness that appalled him.

Such enthusiasm for "life" he had never conceived. What an energy they put into every day—every moment! Theirs was the ecstasy of a bird on the wing; it was even akin to that of a savage on the war-path! He had continually rubbed his eyes in unbelief—but the facts would not bear denial. Then he had set about searching for every possible argument in their favour. He must not give way to resentment, he told himself, merely because what afforded them the greatest gratification afforded him none at all. So radical a difference between his temperament and theirs was to be regretted, but it must not lead him into injustice.

He knew himself pretty well by now—with the years he had become more clearly defined to himself. A less ghostly person stared back at him from the mirror of his soul. He felt as if his personality had concentrated itself, as if it had lost a great deal of its vagueness and shadings. Its gamut had come to comprise a few simple notes that, when struck, sounded the deeper and stronger. His approvals and disapprovals were backed by stronger personal feeling than he had been wont to display in his earlier years. And yet, with this growing tendency towards austerity of character, there was joined an infinite tenderness towards the whole world.

He had been deeply impressed by the words Preston had used to him in the course of their first conversation after the latter's return from his wanderings: "At one time I thought it possible you might end your days in a cloister!" He had often cited this to himself as an instance of his friend's sagacity, for there had been moments of late when he had almost found himself longing for the serenity of the monk's existence. Severe stone mediæval spaces, bare monastic interiors, ripe crumbling walls, had risen in his thoughts—symbols of

repose amid this hurrying, scurrying life of the London season.

The consciousness of his own austerity had made him the more anxious to guard himself against possible narrowness and intolerance. Constance, May, and Gwenny were the last people in the world against whom he should harbour one ungenerous thought. Surely, if, by deliberate self-sacrifice and self-suppression, one rendered happy those with whom one's life was in closest contact, that should be reckoned a great thing to have achieved! Had he not all along based the possibility of his own happiness on that of the others? And were they not happier than ever before in their lives?

He was perfectly aware it clearly followed from this reasoning that he himself should be living in perfect clover, and that, if he wasn't, it could only be from crookedness on his own part. Yet, in spite of all such logic, his constant attempts to crush back that blind, spontaneous passion of rebellion, of remorse, even of anger, which he had felt rising in him, had proved utterly unavailing. In his heart he knew all along that the considerations with which he had tried to sustain himself were the veriest self-deception. And now he had finally been forced to the conclusion that the position was intolerable!

He still clung to his desire to be scrupulously fair to them. He did not complain that his old relation towards them had altogether ceased, that they had long since slipped away from his influence. However much that fact contributed to his present unhappiness, he bowed his head to it now. It was only natural for their minds to claim independence sooner or later. Look, for example, what a gap there had been between himself and his mother! He did not even complain that they had gone their own way, and made their own outlook, and followed their own pleasures. That, again, he admitted, was in the natural course of things; even though he was bitterly jealous of all that seduced them away from him and deprived him entirely of their society—save in the most casual moments. His own personal grievances he

was rigorously careful to exclude; he reserved to himself the mere right of impartial criticism. He had never meant otherwise than that they should find happiness in life, but the mode they had chosen was devoid of a single redeeming feature!

"Utterly and wholly selfish!" Such was the judgment he was constrained to pass on their existence. Never once since their settlement in London had they shown any disposition to render humane service of any kind—at least, not in any way he could respect. They had taken stalls at bazaars, or, metamorphosed into pretty waitresses, had served tea and ices, and dexterously coaxed guineas from unwilling pockets. Their charity, such as it had been, had always gone through the conventional society channels, and, always associated with forms of social pleasure and with aristocratic gatherings, had been more by way of maintaining their standing than by way of spontaneous benevolence.

But, apart from the purely moral aspect of the position, there were other points of rottenness that were grievously manifest. Not only in the attempt to sustain the monstrous structure they had reared was he being forced to narrow his soul, and live and work as the veriest Philistine, but, notwithstanding all Constance's economy in the management of her establishment, they had been spending every farthing of available income—nay, even more than that! He had not at all foreseen this eventuality—he had trusted Constance's calculation absolutely. Yet when he found how one indulgence was inevitably necessitating other indulgences, and how far, in consequence, her maximum anticipations were being exceeded, he had not had the heart to utter a single word of reproach. On the contrary, he had put on a smiling, reassuring face, feeling his back was broad enough for the burden. The fact that they were depending on him would, in itself, have made any protest seem unutterably vulgar. So he had preferred to look into his affairs, change his investments for the sake of higher interest, and strain every nerve generally. He did not fear a breakdown, but the position was perilously

tried—so much so that he had now often to stint himself in various necessary details. What grieved him more than anything was that, for some time past, he had been unable to spare one farthing for benevolent purposes—a luxury in which he had been able to indulge himself practically all his life.

He did not shrink from taking most of the blame on his own shoulders, though there were certainly extenuating circumstances. He was too honest with himself not to see his great love for them had weakened him. Never had his lips been capable of meeting a wish of theirs with the word “no.” And once he had authorized the move to London, he had, as he saw now, given up the reins for good and always; for his authority over their minds had subtly passed away even before that, and the one power he held over them—that of money—he would have scorned to evoke under any conditions. Even in the very last weeks they had had only to toss him a kiss and dazzle him with their smiles and beauty, and he had at once been blinded and disarmed!

Lady Wycliffe, too, had unwittingly been at the bottom of the mischief. His own dear ones had been drawn into the whirlpool gradually, had been unable to resist the powerful influences to which they had been subjected. He, the breadwinner, immersed in toil for their sake (though often enough in idle romantic moments he had thought his calling ignoble, and had longed for freedom to go amid humanity and power to heal its wounds) had been debarred from seeing what they were doing from day to day. It was an irony of ironies that Lady Wycliffe’s friendship, on which he had set such store for the children, should have so largely contributed to bring about the very state of affairs against which his conscience was now in such painful revolt.

Yet he loved her ladyship too well to bear her any ill-feeling. True, he had been wistfully playing with the idea of opening out his heart to her even now, and trying to make her understand how real and deep his rebellion was. Was not, indeed, an intimate talk her

own avowed purpose in asking him to her house on the morrow?—though, to be sure, she had apparently (and characteristically) lost sight of that the very next moment in her impulsive invitation to the others! Nevertheless he had come to the conclusion it would be perfectly futile to say anything to her at this late stage. How truly had his sagacious friend read into her ever so many years ago! With all her warm-heartedness and ready sympathy, with all her quickness to grasp others' points of view, she was yet, when dealing with actual life, entirely incapable of all modes of seeing and arranging other than those customary in her world. In however conventional a manner she might be acting, she always displayed the most charming unconsciousness that it was otherwise than in accordance with the most liberal considerations. But how could he be vexed with so kind and true a woman? She was aging now, so to what profit make her suffer?

He must follow his own conscience—sternly, yet reasonably! He could not believe that those who were most dear to him were as heartless as they appeared; that an important human side of them was really dead. He must win them back to better ideals. The complex selfishness of their days should yield to his old ideal of a refined simplicity. Sympathy with the poor, and as much helpfulness as was in their power must supersede the barren social round. So far as they really cared, by all means they might have their circle of friends, for human intercourse was good and beautiful. But the rush to put foot for a moment amid packed crowds within hundreds of houses that belonged to people who were known to them with less than superficiality, the constant adding on no ground whatever to a visiting list already portentously long—these things seemed to him a perversion.

The position, he recognized, was a difficult one for him to handle. It occurred to him it possibly might be best for everybody if he took up an inexorable attitude, and smashed up the "establishment" without further ado. However, so sudden and drastic a measure did

not really commend itself to him. He had too much sound sense to desire to proceed melodramatically. Besides, he had, if only by silence, sanctioned Constance's party, and he had no wish to make fools of the invited guests. And then his own womenfolk had, no doubt, accepted many invitations for the next few weeks. Whatever steps he might decide on, therefore, must be carried out quietly and with dignity. He might even judge it wise to wait patiently till the end of the season. The house could then be let, and he could bear them off to the country, where, with the opportunities for communion thereby offered, he might hope gradually to re-establish his old influence over them.

IV

EARLY in the afternoon Hubert's reflections were interrupted by the announcement that a Mr. Jones wished to deliver a letter to him personally, and had refused to pass it through the medium of Armstrong.

"What sort of a man is it?" asked Hubert puzzled.

"I can't quite make him out, sir," said Armstrong, "He looks very poor."

Hubert was interested. He rose and went into the hall to look into the matter himself. A tall, clean-shaven man, pale and sad-looking, was waiting in the lobby with extraordinarily meek demeanour. Hubert's eye took in at once that his carefully-brushed clothes were threadbare to the last degree, and that a large, clumsy cravat entirely concealed his shirt-front. Holding a finely-polished silk hat in one hand, the visitor presented a dingy envelope with the other, presuming, at the same time, that he had the honour of addressing Mr. Ruthven. His voice, timid and subdued, as if he almost expected to be cudgelled for his audacity, suggested long futile searching for employment.

Hubert took the envelope, quite unenlightened at hearing that the bearer was a messenger from "Mr. Newton." But the perusal of the missive brought him sufficient recollection of its sender, a fellow law-student whom he had once admired, but of whom he had lost sight for years and years. Hubert, however, was only mildly surprised at hearing from him again after so great an interval—his experience of life had long since taught him that almost everybody turns up again, some time or other. He remembered that this Newton had been a very brilliant fellow. The few who had known

and understood him were perfectly aware that he was never likely to be heard of in the world or even to achieve professional success. His intellect was so many-sided that he could not concentrate himself in any one direction with that exclusive intensity necessary for earning money. The versatility of his intelligence, unsupported by inalienable food and shelter, had proved his ruin.

His letter to Hubert, written in watery ink on a muddy-white sheet, was addressed from a common lodging-house near Spitalfields Market.

"DEAR MR. RUTHVEN—

"Please pardon my intrusion on you, but we were acquainted once upon a time (a long while ago), though there is no reason why you should be able to recall me now. I am that Newton with whom you and others went one night to see an Adelphi melodrama, and with whom, alone, you afterwards wandered, pendulum-like, between his diggings and yours till break of day. We each had such a deal to say that each kept turning back to see the other part of his way again. And so we oscillated to and fro all night long. If the memory has entirely faded, please put me down as an impostor. Otherwise please lend me ten shillings.

"I have been for a long time at the bottom of the deep, deep sea, but at last have obtained a job, and this is an attempt at solving the problem of existence till I am in receipt of my first week's wages. I have not even the sixpence for to-night's bed, but ten shillings will carry me through the week, and shall be faithfully repaid. The bearer, a bed-fellow of adversity, has to pass your way, and good-naturedly undertakes to deliver my request and to bring back your reply, if any.

"Yours obediently,

"WILMOTT NEWTON."

Hubert had a moment of strange emotion. With the memory of this fellow-student came back the flavour of early days when the bitterness of futile striving was

tempered by the freshness of the world and the large horizon of life. In that epoch of glowing youth the world had contained important things and persons, and important events had sometimes happened!

He asked the bearer if he were returning at once, and bade him tell Mr. Newton he would call and see him that same afternoon. The man promised in his pathetically subdued manner to deliver the message, thanking him for his reply with an equally pathetic politeness. Then, with a nervous "good-afternoon," he took his departure, obviously glad to escape from the oppressive palatial atmosphere, and from so disturbing a proximity to one of the world's superior beings.

As the door slammed behind Mr. Jones, Hubert realized that the letter had completely upset him. It could scarcely have caught him in a more susceptible mood. The underworld of London surged upon him again in all its immense reality, with all its immense pity. The world of beauty, pleasure, and luxury was blotted out. He saw humanity scarred, suffering, toiling. He saw vividly the vast stretches of tenement cities whose bleak and sordid streets swarmed with the slave populations.

He was trembling as he returned to his study. Yet he welcomed the episode as breaking up the insufferable apathy of his long afternoon. His impulse was to make at once for the Spitalfields lodging-house. It mattered little that he would be following so close on the heels of the messenger—at any rate he would be escaping from the deadly depression of his own home.

Soon he had left the house and was making his way down the road. Oxford Street was full of traffic and people, but Hubert, in his impatience to get forward, was almost abstractedly unconscious of everything. He walked some little distance, then mounted an omnibus going citywards. He did not anticipate any difficulty in finding the Spitalfields street. In the wanderings of his student days he had learnt to know that very district intimately, and his recollection of it, if not quite distinct, was not entirely vague. He remembered well the church

and the market, and, after an effort, could recall the main conformation of the whole quarter.

He descended at the Bank of England, strolled on foot to Bishopsgate through the heart of the money market, then lost himself in a strange concatenation of back streets and alleys, all familiar to him in the olden days, passing through sociable, gossiping human colonies a-swarm in hidden spaces, and for unexpectedness like the mysterious resources of Neapolitan by-ways.

The dramatic swiftness with which in London one may plunge from the pride of historic and representative thoroughfares into the deepest depths towards which human wreckage is swept, was a fact to which he had grown accustomed in his youth. Yet to-day he could not help feeling surprise at his quick penetration to the heart of these packed, reeking labyrinths, close, sometimes foul, and always full of the mingled sloppy odours that emanated from the houses and the gutters and the gratings. The air was thick to the eyes as it was thick in his nostrils. The children sprawling all over the roadways and congregated on the doorsteps looked after him, and occasionally strutted behind him—the more daring spirits calling out mockingly. Worn-out women eyed him suspiciously from their doorways, and besotted men leered at him as they stood about heavily outside the public-houses (which, inside, were packed with humanity, smoking, carousing, singing, chattering, recklessly treating, making the usual Saturday inroad into the infinite riches of its replenished treasures).

At last, after much roundabout and random exploration, Hubert found his way to the great stone church which he had always retained in his mind as the landmark of the district. Its solemn green graveyard ran alongside a busy main road full of factories and commerce, and its steeple shot up romantically high above the dilapidated neighbourhoods. From the chiselled form of Greek urn and marble monument was wafted the aroma of ancient civilizations, and with it a sense of abiding mystery, sweet and brooding, infinitely peaceful.

Presently Hubert plunged again into another network of streets at the back of the church, and, with the help of some slight inquiry, was able to find the lodging-house from which Newton had addressed him. It was a comparatively new building, palatial against the adjacent grimy houses. Lounging under its great open windows, a score of labourers smoked short clays or remained in a fixed melancholy. Their expressionless eyes instinctively turned after Hubert as he made for the high doorway. Here another loungee with a mysterious manner (that suggested some large network of conspiracy) accosted him in a hoarse whisper, infinitely significant, inquiring whom he wished to see, and offering to call the party out. Hubert vaguely replied he dared say he'd find the man he wanted, and—heedless of what he might flounder into!—brushed aside his officious interlocutor. Then, passing the foot of the stone stairway that twisted its way up at the side of the lobby, he made his way into the spacious common-room. Despite the ample ventilation, a wave of hot air smote his face, uniting strangely with the buzz of conversation from the few scattered groups at the long wooden tables. It was just about tea-time, but not many of the denizens of the house had yet come in. To Hubert the scene was infinitely pathetic. A white-haired old man, with bent back, weird massive features, and a venerable beard, was broiling a bloater at the blazing fire at the further end of the room; whilst other ragged wrecks were similarly busy at a second great fire nearer the door. Midway between the two was a small counter fixed in an aperture in the wall, across which from the adjoining kitchen (tantalizingly stocked with provender) mugs of tea were being served to a little motley crowd of purchasers. In the centre of this crowd, a fine stalwart figure towered up in startling contrast with the broken, limp, ragged reprobates pressing about him. Jauntily poised on the back of his head was a resplendent silk hat—that desperately cherished symbol of the outcast's rightful standing, to be clung to even longer than hope itself, its impeccability renewed from time to time even at the sacrifice of

a night's shelter! Its gloss had outlasted the smartly cut frock-coat, now, alas! of the colour of an autumn leaf, sere, dry, and fallen. But the bearing of the man was proud and firm and soldierlike. There was no mistaking the West-End clubman and officer. As he turned away from the little bar, carrying his tea and bread-and-butter, his eye caught Hubert's, and his lips moved in a grim smile, as if to say: "You understand, old man!"

At the same time Hubert had been looking about for Newton, less hoping to recognize than to be recognized. But he perceived neither the messenger who had brought the letter to Portland Place, nor anybody he could identify with any degree of probability as the man he had come to see. So after waiting some little time, he thought he had better take half-an-hour's turn in the neighbourhood immediately around.

The streets here, though still grimy and thick with life, were yet far less mean than those he had previously traversed. There was a touch of an earlier century about the dingy brick two-storey houses, with here and there a pleasing old-world feature—a projecting carved moulding over a doorway, a strange bit of ironwork, an ancient fan-light of harmonious design. Sometimes he caught glimpses of interiors—the decayed little rooms, occupied as tenements, seemed all panelled in mellow oak, and the tiny entrance-corridors, often worn and dirty beyond all reclaiming, were similarly wainscoted.

The half-hour passed quickly, and Hubert hurried back to the lodging-house and again strolled into the common-room, eyeing the inmates searchingly. As he doubtfully moved down the room, and stood hesitating right in the middle of it, a bearded, middle-aged man with sad, sunken eyes and shaggy eyebrows, who was seated somewhat apart on a bench under one of the high windows, put down the evening paper he had been reading, and, after watching Hubert for a moment, rose and came forward.

"I am Wilmott Newton," he said. "Of course you won't recognize me after all these years."

The man before him was entirely a different being from the Newton he had known. His beard was thick

and shot with white, so that its colour was curiously akin to the unpleasant drab of his clothes—a cheap, ill-fitting jacket-suit with clumsy seams. His face was wasted, his voice had coarse vibrations. Newton as a young man had been slim and charming. But Hubert had no doubts as to his identity. The smile was the same; the ghost of the old Newton made itself sufficiently felt in the new Newton. They shook hands—quietly and coldly, certainly with formality. Something seemed to stand between them, to check effusion or cordiality.

“I preferred to come personally,” murmured Hubert, embarrassed to make a beginning. He was disappointed at this tame meeting, but scarcely knew what else he had expected.

“It’s very kind of you, indeed,” said Newton; “but, of course, I didn’t mean to put you to so much trouble.”

“I should only have idled away the afternoon,” explained Hubert rather shamefacedly. He felt almost as if he had intruded on the other’s misery, and ought to apologize. “Besides,” he added, “the prospect of a talk with you was tempting.”

At Newton’s suggestion, they got into a corner. The room was rapidly filling now, but any notice that was taken of them was not pronounced enough to be disconcerting. Newton explained further his position at the moment. He had been six months out of work, but at last had been given a place by the foreman of a large paper warehouse at twenty-five shillings a week, so he was looking forward to leaving the lodging-house and returning to the luxury of a furnished bedroom of his own. His work would have to be done in a great vaulted cellar with gas burning perpetually. But the prospect was welcome, since of late his experiences had been of the roughest. He had been reduced to any kind of odd job he could get—had not escaped the sandwich-boards. At one time he had kept himself alive by picking up cigar-ends, and selling his day’s harvest for a couple of pence. Only a month before he had got a place in a small ready-made clothes dépôt—to which at least he owed the decent suit he now wore. But, unfortunately,

his employer had been bundled off to gaol for buying stolen goods, and Newton had found himself stranded again after only one week of employment. But he was pretty well used to roughing it. He had, in fact, followed all sorts of humble employments for years, with interludes of humbler employments still.

"It is strange to be talking to you again. It seems centuries ago since I dropped out. But I have often thought of you, have read your name in the papers—you were prospering in the old profession."

"It's a matter of mere luck," said Hubert. "Our positions might so easily have been reversed."

"That is certainly comforting," said Newton, smiling. "But I've long since settled down to being a failure among the other failures of the earth. I have always been a bit of a stoic, though, and, with decent food and shelter, such as I am now looking forward to again, I can manage to jog along quite contentedly. In spite of all the privations I have had to bear, my experiences have been interesting, and I still think myself quite as good as if I were the possessor of a respectable worldly position."

Hubert professed to corroborate Newton's philosophy. He himself was no worshipper of "success." After all, the most terrible failure from the world's point of view might, from a truer standpoint, be the very reverse. Nevertheless, his feelings were too harrowed to allow him to consider the career of this old brilliant acquaintance of his with such placid detachment. Moreover, the scene was working upon him—the pitiable types in every stage of decay, the variety of faces with their expressions of hope, defiance, dejection, despair, resignation. He could not keep his eye from running round the room again and again, and he could scarcely trust himself to speak. Newton half-smiled as he observed Hubert's own miserable expression.

"I fear the temperature is not wholly agreeable. If you will allow me to accompany you a little on your way, we can talk going along," he suggested.

Hubert, having handed to him the sum he had asked

for, rose in response to the suggestion. As they passed out together, he took a last quick look about him. The clubman in the faded frock-coat sat in meditative isolation at the corner of one of the long tables, his empty mug and plate before him. Hubert readily picked out the occupants he had noticed on his first entry—they seemed to stand out amid the groups of new-comers. And the final picture impressed itself on him sharply.

They strolled along towards Bishopsgate, talking in the same vein, Hubert obviously sad, Newton also perhaps finding the occasion somewhat irksome. Hubert, indeed, felt quite well that this man, metamorphosed by the years and circumstance, was not in warm touch with him. He had come prepared, as it were, to take him by both hands and pour out his sympathy. But that subtle constraint of which he had been aware at the moment of their meeting had remained during all their conversation. And this aspect of the experience saddened him the more—especially as he felt the fault was not on his side.

They parted at the Bank of England, Newton himself seizing so natural an opportunity of coming to a halt, repeating his thanks, and holding out his hand in farewell. Hubert hoped Newton would write to him occasionally, then, immersed in thought, he abstractedly mounted a homeward omnibus.

V

THE next day Hubert took May to lunch at Arlington Street.

The quartette, the idea of which had so delighted their hostess, proved, however, to be a sextet. Mrs. Drummond, their old friendly neighbour at Lynford, had suddenly come to town for a few days and was staying at the house. To balance her table, Lady Wycliffe had asked Preston to join them, so that her benevolent habit of springing him on Hubert once more found exercise.

"I have good news for you," was her greeting to Hubert. "Madame Almusa has promised me to sing at your party."

"Madame Almusa!" he repeated blankly. "She is to sing for us?"

"Ah, you did not know," she smiled kindly. "I suppose it was to be a little surprise for you in case I succeeded. Mrs. Ruthven should have warned me. And I suppose you were in the conspiracy as well, you wicked little thing!" She shook a deprecating finger at May, who had reddened with pleasure and excitement.

Hubert understood now. To have the divine Almusa sing at one's private party was to achieve the rarest distinction. True, Constance had not been able to announce the fact on her cards, but the sensation would be all the greater for being unannounced, and, if only in view of the possibility of the notoriously capricious divinity's changing her mind, the omission could scarcely be considered a disadvantage. Altogether—as Hubert phrased it to himself—"it would give them a big lift." He had a sudden desire to laugh

aloud. But he maintained the gravest of faces, and thanked Lady Wycliffe on Constance's behalf.

"Yesterday was Almusa's birthday, and I brought her a box of bonbons, of which I have always kept the maker's name a religious secret, so that she has only been able to get them from me. She is very fond of that kind, and has always begged me to give away the secret. So I took the opportunity yesterday of making a bargain with her." Lady Wycliffe laughed and clapped her hands with glee. "However, we shall soon discover something that she'll like even better, and then we shall have a new secret."

She sent in Mrs. Drummond with Preston, the two younger people naturally following together, and took Hubert's arm herself. They settled down very snugly in the dining-room, and Lady Wycliffe at the head of the table had a charming smile for everybody. In the subdued light that filled the hospitable spaces of the old mellow room, her simple dignity seemed to blend gently with the sentiment of the stately portraits that hung against the wainscoting. Hubert was quite near her on the same side of the table as May and Roburne, whilst Mrs. Drummond and Preston sat immediately facing. Mrs. Drummond, now a white-haired old lady with a somewhat rugged face in which were strange depths of softness and pity, had always had a warm regard for her neighbour, and the pair were excellent friends. As Hubert had had May's assurance that she did not view Roburne with any sort of intolerance, he found the ordering of the table entirely unexceptionable.

The conversation, as was natural in so small a party, was for the most part general. But Mrs. Drummond somehow began to feel that Preston was far from at his ease, for he scarcely seemed to be listening to what was said, and once or twice she even addressed him without getting any reply. She also noticed that neither Mr. Roburne nor Miss Ruthven shone particularly in the conversation (which was practically sustained by herself, Hubert, and the hostess), but, as she had been in all Lady Wycliffe's secrets since they were girls together,

the occasional abstraction of the two young people merely made her smile. Preston's case, however, she couldn't understand at all. And once, when the talk was broken up, and Arthur Roburne began to discourse to his young neighbour, whose frank laugh rang out merrily, yet restrainedly, she actually noticed Preston eating his lip instead of his cutlet, and twirling his moustache instead of crumbing his bread. She was a woman of excellent discernment, but she was quite at a loss to account for this aberration on his part.

Meanwhile Hubert was amazed at his own loquacity, for he had by no means been so fortunate as to lose himself in the occasion. At the back of his mind he was picturing a vague Almusa singing to a ghostly audience in his own drawing-room. He had no suspicion that, even before May had made the acquaintance of the Roburne family, Lady Wycliffe, full of sympathetic affection for the Ruthvens, and with her instinctive love of giving destiny a secret push for the good of others whenever she could, had singled out Arthur Roburne as an excellent young man for May to fall in love with. Her sense of the highest expression of her good-will for Hubert was to marry his girls for him. Being neither as shrewd a judge of men as Preston, nor addicted by disposition to examine people searchingly, she accepted the current estimate of the young Balliol honoursman; and the irrepressible play of that ever fresh and charming enthusiasm of hers, combined with an amazingly sure instinct that the two young people would take to each other, had led her to perceive in him every ideal quality and virtue.

Now, Lady Wycliffe was in the habit of ascribing to herself, and always with a glow of pride, an exceptionally subtle apprehension of Hubert's peculiar ideas; yet, curiously enough, her inability to see as he saw, or rather to understand what exactly it was he did see (whilst sincerely imagining she understood perfectly), was exemplified in her present unshakable conviction that Arthur Roburne was just the kind of young man Hubert had had in mind in many past conversations

with her. Had she not always been in perfect agreement when he had declared his hope that his girls might grow up content to marry men who were at an early stage of their careers; happy to give their husbands all the sympathy and help they could, and to share a simple refined existence. Girls only too often regarded marriage as the attainment of a ready-made station and the opportunity for enjoying all the advantages that appertained to it, accepting everything and giving nothing. That point of view, he had often declared, was one of selfish pleasure, and was as vulgar as it was fashionable. He believed his girls would get more real happiness—and that of the highest kind—by doing their utmost for their husbands. A charming touch of Bohemianism, as he used to put it, added immensely to the attraction of wedded life.

Now here was the very man, had thought Lady Wycliffe, overflowing with an almost tearful benevolence, and rubbing her hands with feminine good-hearted mischievous delight. So she had set to work to foster the conditions, and the results were of the happiest. Hubert had had in mind a plain gentleman of high ideals and broad humanitarian views; not, of course, the younger son of a proud Tory earl, inheriting the traditions and prejudices of his class, and pledged to maintain them. Lady Wycliffe never dreamed that this admirable young man without any sense of humour, who had never had (and never would have) any period of unrest, of that eager mental searching that leads to rebellion, was not after Hubert's own heart.

Great and abiding as was her friendship for Hubert, that for the moment had been subordinated to the accomplishment of the idea that had arisen out of it. She had thus, in spite of her genuine desire for one of their old *tête-à-tête*, been quite unable to resist so splendid a chance of giving the young people an extra opportunity of coming together, knowing that the Skeffingtonian taskmastership was hard and unremitting, and that, in spite of May's intimacy with the family, the young man must be suffering agonies of

uncertainty. At Rutland Gate his aunt and sister had always assisted at their meetings, and his people, at present, looked with disfavour on his spending too much of his time in general society, preferring him to concentrate his attention in certain quarters with a view to his advancement. True, May rode regularly in the Row, but Roburne could seldom take a canter at the same time. Thus they were reduced to casual meetings under formal circumstances.

These unpromising conditions notwithstanding, the wooing had proceeded—though as yet the young man was far from feeling sure of having engaged the girl's affections. But Lady Wycliffe was watching it keenly, herself fearfully aware of the extent to which it was hampered, though gleeful at noticing how blind Hubert was to what was a-brewing.

Hubert, for his part, was always relying on Constance to apprise him should either of the girls appear to be forming an attachment. As Constance had not so far communicated any suspicion to him, and as the girls themselves were so extremely young, he was taking it for granted that nothing had as yet arisen to make any demand on his personal attention. Otherwise, he would have felt not a little disquieted that May's affections should have been won in such a quarter—an event of which the logical outcome could only be her entire absorption for good and always into that life from which he still hoped to win her back.

VI

HUBERT was the first in the drawing-room on the evening of Constance's party. He had looked through the list of people who were soon to be flooding in, and, though the vast majority were quite unknown to him, he was anxious to do his best to be of help in entertaining them.

Constance would have preferred giving a dance for the girls, but her own list of young men was far too meagre, and she was not yet intimate enough with her fashionable friends to be able to utilize somebody else's. Her position, in fact, was necessarily tentative; she had to feel her way cautiously, fearful of snubs, morbidly conscious of her modest past, and of the slenderness of her personal claim to attention—in short, knowing only too well that she had yet to take root in these fascinating social altitudes.

Nothing untoward had happened to seduce their guests elsewhere. The awning stretched from the house-door to the roadway. The many windows blazed with light, the illumined angle of the two serried streets designing itself on the night. All the rooms on the first floor had been thrown open—the smaller and cosier ones arranged for quiet conversation—and on the landing an embowered space had been improvised for the fashionable gipsy band. On guard at the foot of the double staircase two life-size bronze children held aloft many-branched candelabra. Myrmidons (supplied by contract with the supper) had possession of the hall, the stairway, and the kitchens, and in Hubert's study steaming silver urns stood on the long table amid the usual riot of crockery and refreshments. The house

was ready—gay and scented and gleaming ; the company alone was wanting.

Gweny was the first to join Hubert in the drawing-room. She wore a simple amber gown, very soft and flowing, with a string of tiny pearls at her throat. Her hair was dressed wavingly over her ears, with a deep-green leaf at the side and a vivid scarlet bud set against it. She struck him as looking remarkably tall to-night as she came to him in her usual undemonstrative fashion. He kissed her on the forehead, feeling that if she, too, had grown strangely aloof from him, it was rather in a different way from the others. Somehow he did not resent her defection as much as he resented May's. She had never been so near to him as her sister, and her aloofness, which had to some extent characterized her manner even as a child, might almost be looked upon—at least in certain of its aspects—as a purely natural development. The thoughtfulness that so becomingly radiated from her features had always had a baffling suggestion of mystery about it. Hubert shrewdly suspected she had ideas of her own, though it was easy to understand she had joined in the same round as the others as a matter of course. He knew, moreover, that she was by no means as popular as her younger sister, and that people seemed to prefer to admire her from a distance.

Yet he himself was scarcely an exception, for he still retained the old unconscious favouritism, and was dazzled almost to confusion when May appeared in the doorway just then, all in white foam, with lines of exquisite coral round her neck, a green sprig in her bosom, and a white rose in her silken hair that was witchingly fresh and radiant. She came across the room with a joyous movement, her red lips parted, her teeth gleaming, her eyes dancing. With Hubert she was as naturally coquettish as her sister was austere and earnest, and, as she came near him, her face changed again and took on a babyish, large-eyed expression of innocence. But he was too blinded to notice that, in the interim, a quick significant glance had passed between the two

sisters, on May's part of warning and appeal, on Gwenny's of patient disdain.

Meanwhile the band had been taking up its position just outside, and Constance's voice was heard as she exchanged a word with the conductor. Then she came sailing graciously into the room, fresh and fair for her forty years, her full woman's figure admirably gowned in black velvet, against which her bare shoulders rose dazzlingly. A triple necklace of pearls hung low, resting gently on her bosom.

Presently the four found themselves standing in a silent group.

"Why are we all so solemn?" exclaimed May, and just then the sudden noise of instruments tuning up destroyed the tension and set them laughing.

Some of their best friends were inspired to come early, and thus the evening had an intimate beginning which helped greatly to send it off on a smooth career. The actual first arrivals were all of the feminine gender—Preston's favourite sister from Flintshire, Constance's mother and two younger sisters, and Madame Bartolozzi; but soon a little knot of barrister friends appeared to redress the balance with sober dress-coats. Preston, who came up the stairs simultaneously with Lady Wycliffe and Mrs. Drummond, found quite a cheerful nucleus already in the drawing-room. People kept straggling in by twos and threes for the next half-hour, then suddenly the road was alive with carriages, and guests began to pour into the house steadily, spreading themselves out into all the rooms, blocking the staircase, and crushing into every niche and corner. The hubbub of their voices rose in cheerful, sociable discord; a discreet accompaniment of music breaking gently across it.

The windows were wide open to the soft breeze that came from the neighbouring Regent's Park, but to Constance the cool circulating air seemed to glow with a thrilling splendour, and, if now and again a spasm of nervousness overcame her, Lady Wycliffe was near to give her the encouragement of her presence. Yet, the

crowd being for the most part "in the same swim," the task of entertainment was easy enough, reducing itself to a mere watching of the ball as it rolled, with just a judicious touch here and there—a word, a greeting, a discreet introduction—to keep it at full speed.

When at last the rooms seemed full, May slipped away from Constance's side, and, like a sprite, was here, there, everywhere, self-possessed, sparkling, merry. She was more than seen and admired; her active personality dominated the house, impressed itself—with skill, with fine resource. At the same time her own enchantment knew no bounds; the whole feeling of this party in their own house was glorious to her. There was nothing which did not give her pleasure—the lights, the people, the homage, the large house itself, the awnings, the far-stretching double rank of carriages, the lines of lackeys, the plate, the flowers. She had a large consciousness of every detail.

The innumerable wax candles burnt lower in their sconces, the murmuring flow of music was heard as in the distance, yet always penetrating; people left now and again to go on elsewhere, but there was a steady press of arrivals to take their place. The house was packed. Constance still held her court in the drawing-room, and here, too, Gwenny was content to stay, though Hubert, like May, was at length impelled to choose a larger field for his perambulations.

But, unlike May, he soon found he was hardly at home in his own house. All along he had had a cool perception that this throng of earls, baronets, soldiers, politicians, millionaires, and their corresponding women-kind, had not been drawn here by his wife, but that the central figure of the evening was in reality Lady Wycliffe. How pitifully self-deceived was Constance!

Here and there his eye noticed an occasional guest who wore an uncomfortable air of aloofness. But it was amusing to feel that he himself was as much of an "outsider" as any of these. He prowled about vaguely amid the hundreds and hundreds of people he had never seen before in all his life, amid these gleaming

toilettes with which his house bloomed like a flower-garden!

On his restless way upstairs again, he encountered Arthur Roburne, whom he had not yet seen that evening. The young man greeted him eagerly, pressing his hand effusively; inquired how he had been since they had met at Arlington Street, and stayed a moment lounging against the balustrade. These civilities interchanged, they pursued their respective ways. At the top of the staircase Hubert found himself in a momentary block of converging currents, and face to face with Preston. He flashed at his friend a meaning smile, but Preston failed to respond. Then Hubert, noticing he was in a strange fit of abstraction, gave him a gentle dig. "Why this solemnity?" he whispered in his ear. "I had expected you'd be amused by the incongruity of this whole foolish business?"

"Oh, I wasn't thinking about that," answered Preston mysteriously, as with the renewal of movement they were borne past each other. Ultimately Hubert found himself in the neighbourhood of his wife, and felt a certain comfort in having got back to his starting-point.

In the meanwhile Preston pursued his way downstairs, and began to look about him eagerly. He drew a breath of relief as he noticed Arthur Roburne in conversation with a group of two matrons and two daughters, and May just turning away from another group at a distance. He at once hurried forward to intercept her.

"Hullo!" she exclaimed in playful greeting.

"Hullo!" he returned. "You look happy—have been dispensing bright glances? None for me though!"

"Oh, well, you've seen through me ever so long ago," she answered playfully. "I know better than to attempt to humbug *you*."

"Humph! I sincerely hope this flattering attitude of yours is not to be permanent."

"I see. Like all old fogeys, you find it hard to exist without being humbugged."

"Without the kind of humbug in question now—certainly!" he answered with imperturbable gravity.

She was habitually hard upon him because she knew he was more than her match, and she was perhaps slightly chagrined at having to acknowledge it—even though only to herself. His courtly parry of her attack made her feel rather ashamed, and she was quick to make amends for what must have sounded very much like pertness, though she only meant it for banter.

"That is really charming of you," she flashed back. "And you deserve a bright glance for it." She gave him one of her most sparkling. "But what's that queer thing you're playing with?"

Her expression changed as suddenly again to one of curiosity. "A broken ring!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "How romantic!"

"Yes," he sighed. "There's a real romance behind it!" He slipped it back again into his waistcoat pocket.

She looked interested, but on her guard. "You're not serious?"

"Just like the irony of things. All my life I have tried my hardest to achieve obscurity, yet I have been unable to escape a reputation for levity. Please believe that I am entirely in earnest."

"In that case I want to hear all about it."

He considered a moment. "I don't at all feel sure that I ought ever to say anything about it—even to you!"

"Oh, you must," she protested in her most coaxing and sympathetic manner. "I always knew you had some secret sorrow. The very bumps on your dear old face have always had such a mournful way about them. Do confide in me, please."

"There's nothing I should like better, only you never take me seriously," he complained. "Naturally, my dear girl, a man doesn't care to have his most sacred confidences received with flippancy."

"Now you are unkind," said May, her voice tinged with distress. "Won't you come and sit in this nice corner, all among the pretty flowers, and tell me everything! I shall be so nice and sympathetic."

He had somehow made her thoroughly believe in his seriousness, and she did not dissimulate her eagerness as she led the way and quickly seized possession of the tempting point of vantage.

He dropped into the seat beside her. "I confess I find it difficult. There has been so much banter between us all these years."

"That's not my fault," she declared. "You set the tone—you always masked your true self and only seemed to care about puzzling me."

He looked at her keenly. She seemed bent on having things out with him and coming to a better understanding.

"That was merely due to my sense of propriety," he explained. "I was never created to be read by the young person, so I was forced to present you with an expurgated edition of myself."

"There! You see it's you who won't take me seriously—and I want to be friendly with all my heart."

"I'm sorry," he half-groaned; "but it's a pretty tough struggle for me to take myself seriously. Life is really such a ridiculous business."

"You strange thing! I do believe you're going from bad to worse. You used not to be always so—so—well, let us say 'eccentric.' Why, once upon a time, we used to get on beautifully together. I've known you to be quite natural—just clever and interesting, you know—for hours at a stretch. Don't you remember that summer evening at Paris when uncle brought you across with him, and we came to meet you both at the Gare du Nord? It was my seventeenth birthday, and you gave me, you remember what—don't you?"

He nodded, glancing instinctively at the coral necklace that gave such a charming touch of colour to the picture. Her fingers played with it a moment ere she continued softly and in enchanted reminiscence—

"We were all so happy that evening, what with dining on the boulevards, and strolling afterwards in the warm night through the Champs Elysées and some of the great avenues. How sweet and silent it grew as we got

further and further away from the busy part! I can see the silhouettes of the great houses now, and the wonderful starry sky. And then later on, what an enchantment it was to come back to the brilliant boulevards again, with all the life and sparkle! We walked on ahead, do you remember? And how we talked, and talked—you and I! Those are the moments I treasure, they were so beautifully serious. I like you more for them than for all our years of friendly snarling at each other. Now I really do believe you have a deep hidden sorrow in your life, and I also really believe that, in spite of everything, I am your best friend—next to uncle, of course. And even uncle isn't more fond of you than I am. So you must tell me everything. If you won't trust me, you'll never find anybody else half as sympathetic. Do tell me," she pleaded, with her eyes as well as her voice; "me—your little friend!"

The moments to which she had alluded could scarcely have been more beautiful than her own face as she spoke—so, at least, thought Preston.

"I do trust you," he answered gravely.

"Now you are a dear!" she exclaimed, her eyes glistening.

He was still silent for awhile, but she waited patiently.

"Well, now for my romance," he began at last. "I once lost my heart to a very beautiful little girl."

"Was it long ago?" she asked eagerly.

"Years," he replied. "We divided a ring, because we had to part. I kept one half and she the other. She promised to be my sweetheart true for life. When we met again years afterwards, she had quite forgotten me and my ring as well. That lay somewhere neglected, and as for myself, I had difficulty in recalling myself to her."

May's face was suddenly blanched. "Oh!" she exclaimed, drawing her breath sharply.

"Ultimately her part of the ring was paraded for a moment, but—it was immediately consigned again to its old oblivion, in which it has remained ever since."

She sprang up, laughing.

"Ah—a comedy! You have acted it splendidly all through. And you actually succeeded in making a fool of me! There were almost tears in my eyes at one time—I can be a goose at times. So that is the secret sorrow that weighs down your life? I congratulate you on keeping so solemn a face."

"I assure you I am perfectly in earnest. Come, now, confess you have been fickle."

"True, you caught me tripping, but, after all the pathetic expressions you put on, how could I suppose you were at your old tricks again! Besides, it's really too bad of you, bringing up that old babyish piece of business."

"Babyish!" he groaned. "How terribly severe you are!—you hit me hard."

She stamped her foot prettily.

"I understand!" she exclaimed. "You sometimes go on like this when you're hungry. Happily, supper is now to be had. Let me see if I can't find you some other girl—a nice one, of course—to mystify. You won't have any appetite otherwise. I must admit there are not very many of them to be seen; we are not boys and girls to-night, but important grown-up people. Yet there are distinct compensations—even if there isn't much fun. There are lots of people who will be very attentive to us after seeing who are here. We shall be able to consider ourselves in the tip-top swim."

"You are very fond of that kind of swimming?" he observed.

"I couldn't live without it," she answered solemnly. "But now to find the pretty girl for you—somebody with a good memory, especially for broken rings," she added. She began to move off, and he had no option but to follow.

"But won't *you* sup with me—if I promise to conduct myself with all due regard to your susceptibilities."

"I'm sorry," she returned; "but I've already promised to talk to somebody else during supper. However, a preliminary ice would be acceptable."

"How chilling!" he exclaimed, looking very sad indeed.

"Please don't continue that comedy," she begged, changing her tone to grave friendly entreaty, as she took his arm.

"My dear girl, I have done my best to assure you it isn't a comedy, and I wish you would believe me."

"It *is* a comedy," she insisted, frowning at him significantly. "You're not going to catch me again."

There was an appreciable interval of silence. As the frown faded, her face was left clouded and distressed.

"Of course," he said, looking full at her, as a message of mutual understanding flashed between them. "Deuced clumsy of me to keep up the joke! Babyish joke, too! I hope you'll forgive and forget."

"Of course I forgive you. And let us both forget."

VII

THE ice took the less chilling form of an infinitesimal quantity of mineral-water which May pretended to be sipping, whilst Preston, with an impassive countenance, ate a mustard-and-cress sandwich—a kind he detested—which he had taken at random. Then she begged him to escort her back to the drawing-room.

On the stairway they met Madame Bartolozzi descending. As she rustled down in her gay brocade dress, she had all the traditional ease of charming Continental womanhood. Despite her greying hair, she yet retained that fresh, dignified maturity of appearance and manner, which, with its accompanying suggestion of romance, had so fascinated Hubert's mother years before.

"I have just been singing, Miss May," she said with a touch of reproach in her soft foreign accent. "Of course you were careful to take your dear naughty self out of the way."

"I'm sorry—I did not know you were to sing so soon," said May, with studied girlish brusqueness and carelessly averted eyes—subtly intimating that all such friendly advances on Madame's part were unacceptable.

"I suppose we must forgive you then," returned Madame Bartolozzi amiably, seemingly unaware of the girl's coldness. "But I really could not be expected to sing *after* the divine Almusa. By the way, what a lovely surprise you have sprung on us all—I must really congratulate you. I heard it whispered the other day that she might be expected to-night, but nobody believed she would actually be heard. However, she has arrived, and I have been asked to accompany her. It seems she is going to repeat the very song I have just been giving."

"But do you think anybody is likely to notice that?" asked May in innocent off-hand reassurance, as she continued her way up on Preston's arm, leaving Madame Bartolozzi (who in her heart was possessed of an extreme vanity, and, moreover, considered Almusa somewhat overrated) to ponder which end of the dart was meant for her—the poisoned point or the tickling feather.

In the drawing-room they found the divinity still affably smiling in the full rays of Constance's effusive welcome, and May came forward to bow daintily to the world-famous cantatrice. Preston, too, was presented, but he managed to steal away after a moment or so.

Now Arthur Roburne, who had sufficiently paid his addresses to the right persons, and who had in the meanwhile lost sight of his May, was prowling about in search of her. Happily Skeffington hadn't turned up after all, having had a lump of dirt blown into his eye as he was driving home from Downing Street, and the eye was too inflamed to permit of his going out for the rest of the evening. Roburne, in consequence, had an unusual sense of freedom, and he came swooping down on May as soon as Almusa's attention was otherwise engaged.

"I want you to come to the rescue," he begged with comic lugubriousness. "My tie has burst at the back. Cannot one of the servants put in a stitch for me—otherwise my career this evening threatens to come to an abrupt and untimely ending."

His disconsolate expression made her laugh. "Go upstairs one flight more. Knock at the second door on the right. Inside you will find somebody—the good homely fairy who will save your career."

"It sounds complicated," he said, looking nervous.

"I'll find the door for you and knock—you must carry all the rest through for yourself."

She led the way light-heartedly, he following close after her. At the top of the stairs she rapped smartly at one of the doors, then moved away immediately with the gracious observation: "I am almost famished—we were scarcely able to dine to-night. You'll find me in the hall."

And there he rejoined her some five minutes later, his face shining with the nearest expression to that of joyousness of which it was capable. They found a cosy little table, prettily laden with wine and fruit, in one of the smaller supper-rooms, just beneath a charming little Turner—a gift of Preston's for the new house. The remembrance of the fact would have sufficed to make May change to another table, but, although the picture caught her eye now and again, she was too absorbed in the moment to notice the omen.

So here they sat talking and waiting patiently. At intervals of ten minutes a fresh man approached, and to him they repeated their choice from the menu. But nothing ever came of it. However, they sipped wine and crumbled bread contentedly, May making merry at the delay, notwithstanding her sharp-set appetite. For she was now possessed by a pleasant half-fatigue which made her lazily yield herself to an instinctive flow of gaiety and laughter. She was living intensely in the present—even to the exclusion of the immediately preceding present. And the strange luminous web of colour shone down at them mystically from the canvas above!

At last soup was brought, and they ate it mechanically. Roburne had expanded by now; he was enlarging on his political prospects. Even in his comparatively humble position, he explained, he had an occasional finger in the destinies of the great British Empire.

"Only to-day, for example, Skeffington dictated a letter on which the most critical issues depended. Of course you will understand, my dear little girl, that I cannot breathe a word of its nature even to you. Now you know what a fine old crusty temper Skeffington has been blessed with, and how ready he is to fly at anybody and everybody. But I've long since learnt how to manage him, and evidently he must have a great deal of respect for my judgment. For no sooner had he finished—it wouldn't at all have done to interrupt him before that—than I ventured to put *my* view of the case to him."

"Did he fly at you?" asked May breathlessly. "Tell me quick!"

"Not at all," said Roburne. "He LISTENED! Just think—the autocrat who will never hear a word from anybody actually listened! I felt that was a good sign, and somehow I thought of you."

"But what had I to do with it?" she asked innocently, her eyes resting full upon his face.

"You had everything to do with it," he declared, adoring her with his look. "In my heart I knew my inspiration had come from you, and I felt my confidence growing. I could scarcely make you understand how self-distrustful I usually am. Well, the upshot of the matter was that, after a little friendly discussion, Skeffington altered the letter—from beginning to end!—according to my ideas. Such a thing is absolutely unprecedented."

"Then I, too, have influenced the destinies of the British Empire! How glorious!" She clapped her hands.

"My dear little girl!" he repeated fervently, though he was uneasily aware that she was taking it all in a merry, jesting spirit. It was a relief, however, to think that she wasn't laughing at him in the least, and that she was really as sympathetic as he could wish. All the same he felt his beginning had miscarried, and that he hadn't at all succeeded in striking the right note, and that in fact it had been kind of her *not* to laugh at him. He hesitated a moment, then launched out again in a vein whose seriousness could not be mistaken, his voice trembling with eager emotion.

"May I confess it is my dream that you may play a really brilliant part in the affairs of our country?"

"What a charming idea!" she exclaimed softly.

"*You* can do anything you please in life," he whispered in an enthusiastic burst of adulation. "You are the cleverest girl in the kingdom, and the most beautiful! For the man who had your help nothing would be impossible. Is it too daring of me to think of winning you? You are so wonderful—I want to worship you always. You are dearer to me than life itself. Say you

will be my wife, dear—I know I don't deserve you, but you would pity me if you only knew how I have suffered, in what a fever of torment I have been living. I have sometimes felt as if I could punch my own head for daring to aspire to you."

This pugilistically-phrased announcement was purged to lyric value by its ardent passion. She was looking at him softly, and though an outsider might hardly have guessed it, she had barely control of herself.

"It is my dearest wish to make you happy," she said simply. There was an infinite tenderness in her look and voice.

"You are good!" he breathed, overwhelmed. "Believe me, dearest, I shall strive that my whole life may be worthy of you, that you may never regret your decision."

"I am sure of that," she exclaimed. "I shall be proud of my husband!"

"Dear May, you make me long for the brave days of old," he broke out enthusiastically. "I should challenge every knight in the country to confess my lady was the fairest in the world."

"And for me you are as gallant a knight as ever lived."

"Thank you, sweet May."

There was a silence. They were looking at each other, yet both were considering, realizing the new relation between them.

"I am so happy, darling," he breathed presently out of the fulness of his emotion. "I love you, I love you."

"I wish we were alone, dearest," she whispered back; "in some strange, silent, beautiful place under the stars."

"Yes," he chimed in. Then, after a pause, he added: "I was only just dreading that you might be snatched away from me at any moment."

His words made her glance round the room quickly. The tables were now all occupied, and there was a cheerful buzz of voices, a clatter of crockery, a bustle of servants. She wondered if her sweetheart and herself had made themselves conspicuous. But the embarrassed emotion which had accompanied the thought died away

almost immediately. She was ashamed of having experienced it. Was he not her gallant knight before all the world? She raised her head proudly with an almost involuntary movement.

But she suddenly laughed as another thought occurred to her. "What a comic place," she exclaimed, "for a declaration of love!"

"Oh, you don't think it really matters?" he said with a shade of uneasiness, as if she had reproached him. "I suppose a supper-room is as good a place as any other."

"I can imagine a more romantic one," she smiled.

"Suppose we leave it," he suggested.

"Oh," she laughed, not displeased at his morbid susceptibility to her lightest word; "I was only joking. It is very comfortable here after all. Please give me some more wine."

He had an inspiration. "Let us drink to our own happiness."

"What a lovely idea!" Her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

He filled up their glasses from the foaming gold-necked bottle. Surreptitiously they clinked them and raised them to their lips. Then, having sipped, they as surreptitiously exchanged glasses and sipped again with a delicious sense of mild wickedness.

They dawdled over the wine a minute or two longer, then they rose, and he took her upstairs.

"You know, dear, I really ought to be making myself useful," she reminded him on the way. "I am supposed to be seeing that all the poor neglected folk find their way downstairs to be fed."

"Please let them starve," he begged, pleasantly surprised to find himself inspired to humour.

"Oh, well, I suppose everybody concerned will take it for granted that I'm making myself as useful as I ought to be," she said yieldingly. "So I mean to indulge in the luxury of being weak for once and giving way to temptation."

There was certainly less crush on the staircase now, with so many people in the supper-rooms, but the

drawing-room still seemed full. So they carefully avoided it, and, turning back past the band, they entered one of the rooms on the other side of the landing. There were only a few people sitting about just then, and, not long after, the lovers suddenly discovered they had the room to themselves. As, however, they sat facing the open door in full view of the band and of all passers-by, no particular significance could have reasonably been attributed to their conversation—especially having regard to the hitherto discreet character of their acquaintance-ship.

VIII

SHORTLY after three in the morning, Preston, who had stayed to smoke a quiet pipe with Hubert, rose to bid his host good-night. During those pleasant minutes, passed in friendly silence on both sides, Preston had puffed away, as apparently calm and unrelated to human emotion and passion as he had ever appeared in his life. And his hand-grip was, as always, a consolation to Hubert for the burden of existence.

Hubert was the last person astir in the house, and, after a moment of idle, vague lounging, he made his way up the stairs, extinguishing the last lights as he went.

Yes, it had all been a success! The majority of their guests had stayed late; the gathering, as the hours had gone by and the champagne flowed, having taken on a perceptible degree of animation. Tongue-strings had been veritably loosened, faces had grown flushed, laughter had made itself heard on all sides. And as soon as the word had flown that Almusa was about to sing, everybody had crushed up eagerly to the drawing-room, blocking all the approaches. Finally a hush had fallen over the house, and then, suddenly, the magic voice had soared out with a wonderful carolling sweetness, that held them all enchanted. Constance's fame as a hostess was assured! But the divinity had been more than gracious, had not only given them a second piece, but had thrown in a final morceau that, alas! was all too short. Great personages had been astonishingly cordial to the members of the household, and from Constance's face had shone a subtle radiation as of the ecstasy of a soul in Paradise. Her mother, too, had

seemed perfectly dazed at breathing the same air with the very pick of the inhabitants of those "fashionable-intelligence" columns on which she had always so greedily nourished herself.

Hubert felt only too well how much the occasion had meant to his wife, and even May's warm kiss of good-night, followed by two more unexpected ones, full of deep affection, had almost made him wince. Gwenny had kissed him with less demonstration (though not with less tenderness), but to-night he had only appreciated that the more.

And now at last the world had settled down to coolness and to silence. Hubert was fatigued, yet, although the feverish sense of the hours that had passed still beat in his blood, he was pleasurablely conscious of the brooding night without, as of some eternal purity charming the tired spirit with its sweet calm, its large repose.

Well, the affair was over. It was the first of the kind in his house—it should be the last! He would try to make the most of the few hours rest before him, for he must be at his chambers as early as usual.

The door of Constance's bedroom (which was immediately above the drawing-room, and of the same generous dimensions) stood unexpectedly open, and Hubert was surprised at the dim light that came from it. But just then the unmistakable sound of an almost hysteric sobbing startled him disagreeably. In great alarm, he advanced into the room. Constance, huddled in a dressing-gown, was crouching on the hearth-rug before the screened fire-place, her back against a low arm-chair, her head bent forward. The one light in the room, set high in a sconce near the chimney, shone down gently on her shaking form.

He quickly went across to her, but the thick carpet muffled his footsteps, and she did not look up.

He stood by her a moment in wonder. Across the dark spaces of the room, wherein the canopied bed seemed to lose itself, glistened the long yellow silk hangings of the three windows. The immense Empire wardrobe, stiff and mellow, with classic columns and

chiselled golden garlands, loomed vast and full of character amid the shadows. The creamy panelling of the walls stretched dull and smooth, and the rare prints and water-sketches that hung here and there against it, each in precious isolation, were all reduced to the same vague uniformity. Again the deep stillness of the world was wafted on his senses suddenly. For a moment he knew that he was very dizzy and tired, then he forgot where he was and what he was.

Another choking sob from Constance just served to avert his swoon. The sharpness of his thoughts and senses were abruptly restored to him, and he was staring at his wife and instinctively explaining to himself that she had been overwrought by the excitement of the long evening. Impulsively he placed his hand on her hair.

"Constance!" he called softly.

He could feel her shaking with renewed sobbing.

"Oh, Hubert, Hubert," she moaned. "It is terrible—terrible!"

"I fear you are a little unstrung—you need rest."

After one or two unsuccessful efforts, she checked her sobs at last. "Yes, I need rest. But I cannot keep silent any longer. Things have come to a crisis."

"But what can be amiss?" he gasped.

He still stood with his hand on her hair. She raised herself painfully, slowly, and he helped her. Then she sank into the chair.

"How shall I tell you, Hubert? The poor child!—it is too horrible."

His heart beat with anxiety, despite himself; but he kept his outward calm.

"Speak, dear," he said quietly. "Surely nothing can have befallen either of the children—not any accident since they said good-night to me." He paused a moment in bewilderment, half suspecting she was the victim of some hysteric imagining. She was still silent. "Speak," he said again. "There is nothing in life which I am not steeled to bear."

She raised her tear-stained face to his, and at last jerked the truth at him.

"Gweny has gone over to Catholicism—she has only to take the formal steps. She has been under the influence of that wicked woman—that Madame Bartolozzi—for years. But the worst of the business is that she is now determined to take the vows."

Hubert stared at her blankly.

"Don't you understand? She wants to bury herself for life in a convent."

"Then things *have* been happening!" The words were less addressed to her than to himself.

"Gweny has never given any of us her confidence. She has preferred to take up with strangers. She has always had her own thoughts, and, oh!—such a stubborn, iron will! I should never have believed it."

Hubert drew over a chair, and sat so as to face her.

"My dear Constance," he said, hoping his own calm reasonableness would extend itself to her; "I have been under the impression that you were all perfectly happy and united. Perhaps it is my fault that I have been so blind. But I am all in the dark. Won't you tell me briefly what has been going on?"

"God knows I have tried to do my best for the children," she broke out, as if unable to compose herself for the reasonable conversation he suggested. "Once upon a time they loved me—now Gweny disapproves of me, and May looks down on me. May is not even civil to my family."

He stared at her again, astounded at this fuller revelation of a divided household.

"To think I should have come to be resented as a stranger in the house after all these years!" she exclaimed, breaking into sobs afresh. "Sooner or later that had to come, I suppose. Children that are not one's own always turn against one."

"Surely things are not so black as you see them," urged Hubert, who thought it possible she might be taking an exaggerated view of some minor dissension. "You are over-fatigued, and not quite yourself. There must be some misunderstanding. Our girls are at heart too good to cherish such feelings against you."

"Things are as I tell you, Hubert. I see them only too clearly. Years ago I felt Gwenny slipping away from my influence, and now what I have always dreaded has come at last. And as for May, I repeat she despises me—I am not well-connected enough for *her*. Oh, I have brought it on myself—this life has been all a mistake, Hubert. We ought never to have come to London."

"That is the last thing I should have expected to hear from *you*," he could not help exclaiming.

"Ah, Hubert, you do not know what misery I have had to endure of late. We had a scene to-day, all to ourselves—at the last moment before coming down to the drawing-room. Gwenny declared she hated the whole business, and she would refuse to be yoked to us any longer. She wanted to go to you at once and make another scene, and we had almost to go down on our knees to implore her to be silent. I trembled like a leaf, afraid it would upset you too much. It would have been a catastrophe if people had had to be turned away from our door. I don't know how I ever got through the evening—I had to force myself to forget with a great brute effort. It was like gulping down a huge bitter apple, and keeping on smiling."

"Ah, you managed that part very well indeed. And now, I suppose, follows the inevitable indigestion." He sought to touch a lighter note, but in vain.

"It is not only that," she went on miserably. "I feel that something is radically wrong in this house. Do not think, Hubert, that I have not been aware your life has been apart from ours. If I had only had the courage not to have kept any thought from you at the beginning, I should have had a clearer conscience now."

Gradually he got her to talk more freely. In the early years of her marriage, she and May had been firm friends, though even then she had had a resentful suspicion of being keenly eyed by the child and constantly weighed in the balance. As for Gwenny, she, from the very beginning, had held herself somewhat aloof from both of them.

"I always had a strange, anxious feeling about her—she was so mystic and religious and awe-struck, engaged in inward contemplations. I knew she didn't care about pleasure as other girls do, and even when she did allow herself to be amused a little, you always felt that underneath she wasn't at all sure she wasn't risking her soul. I used to be puzzled what quite to make of her, and used only to be too thankful when she appeared to be getting along fairly happily. Of course, when I first came to understand what was brewing in her I was thunderstruck. I did not know how to fight it, though I did my utmost to win her over to me. I was glad when we went abroad—it was a comfort to think she was being taken away from the fascination of that horrible woman! But she was not to be coerced into refusing to correspond with her, and, whilst we were on the Continent, she subjected herself wilfully and defiantly to every influence that could deepen her religious tendencies. She literally steeped herself in Catholicism. Still I did not really believe she would throw over her own religion—I preferred to think the whole business was an affectation on her part. A dangerous one, but still an affectation. Afterwards I still continued to receive Madame Bartolozzi—I thought it best not to court any unpleasantness, but to let things just glide along smoothly."

"But surely, from what you tell me now, you have all along been taking rather a morbid view of the child's religious leanings. Why attach so much importance to the matter?"

"A morbid view? Is faithlessness to one's own creed an unimportant matter?"

"You astonish me!" he exclaimed. "I never suspected you felt these matters of religious doctrine so poignantly."

"I have always felt the Church more than you. But I shrank from asserting myself. You were always so impartial, and I dreaded your criticism."

Her words made him wince. He had never then really been so close to his wife as he had imagined! How pitifully blind he had been! He had not even understood the children! A sense of bewilderment possessed

him. The air seemed to vibrate with revelations to come.

"I am sorry," he could only murmur. "I am sorry. I wish I had only known!"

She did not answer, but sat brooding miserably.

"Yet Gwenny has accompanied you everywhere since we have been settled in London," he found himself saying presently. "She does not by any means seem to have avoided pleasure."

"She took 'going out' for granted, I suppose, as part of the routine of a girl's life. Besides, she no doubt thought you wanted them both to go into society. At the same time I am sure she never liked it. Once before she rebelled openly, and since then she has sullenly permitted herself to be led. I was in hopes that the excitement of parties and dances would absorb her, and wean her away from morbid broodings about religion. But, as it now turns out, I was altogether mistaken. She hates the life like poison, but, so far as possible, she did not wish to make herself disagreeable to us others. Naturally she could not lightly violate the spirit of loyalty that bound her to May and myself."

"What do you mean exactly by that?" he asked.

"There was a spirit of loyalty that kept us together in spite of all antagonisms. No one of us could tear herself away from the others. The differences between us, no matter how discordant they threatened to become, were sacred to ourselves, were to be shielded jealously from every eye, and, short of the disruption that has now occurred, even from yours."

"I see. It was a spirit of loyalty that naturally divided the house into two camps, according to sex."

"I suppose so," she admitted, hanging her head miserably.

"But Scripture says that a house divided against itself cannot stand," he exclaimed sternly.

"Every house inhabited by the two sexes is from the start divided against itself," she insisted. "It used to be the same in my father's home, and it is the same everywhere. The banding together, as against one's menkind,

is not exactly brought about consciously. But it is a reality in the end, and one tacitly accepts it."

"And so this tacit loyalty has hitherto been sufficient to keep poor Gwenny tied on to you and May?"

"I needed her to help us to secure our position. We were on our trial with people, and the three of us were known and thought of and spoken of together. They formed such a striking contrast, May and Gwenny, and that helped to impress us on people's minds. If Gwenny had abandoned us, we should have been sadly hampered. Our individuality as a social unit would have got destroyed."

"Your individuality as a social unit would have got destroyed!" repeated Hubert. "So it has come to that!"

"Don't look at me so bitterly, Hubert, please," she begged hoarsely, covering her face with her hands. "I know what you are thinking of me, and I deserve it."

"Constance," he said more gently. "Please don't imagine that I am reproaching you. But once upon a time we used to look freely into each other's minds and hearts; now, even when we are closest together, our minds are quite out of touch. I welcome even this painful conversation—don't you see it unites us again?"

"Yes, dear, it makes me distinctly happier to be opening my heart to you."

"In the days when I first knew you, your ideas of life were other than they are now," he went on in quiet pursuance of his theme. "Of course, everybody's ideas change more or less, but isn't it ironic to recall that, in the glow of youth, you used to declaim against what was known to both of us as 'the Philistine life.'"

"I know what you wish to lead up to, Hubert. Perhaps our thoughts of late have been more in harmony than you imagine. Do not suppose that I never watch myself. Whatever my life may have become in practice, my old girlish self has not entirely died away. I know that I have become transformed into a Philistine of the Philistines; I know that the transformation began years ago at Lynford. Theoretically, my contempt for the

conventional, selfish life was unabated, but somehow my watchful self got lulled into a sort of torpor. Recollect I had always lived in a wretched way from hand to mouth, and that at last I found myself on a bed of roses. I was so happy to be settled in life, and everybody was so kind and cordial that my own individuality got swallowed up. I felt myself slipping, slipping; yielding, yielding. It was so much easier to become one of the crowd—to do, to think, and to like what everybody else did, thought, and liked. After my rough experiences as an outcast, prosperity was fatal to me. And so I have grown middle-aged and stupid—and snobbish! You would be justified in thinking that I haven't a soul now above *Debrett*."

"My poor Constance," he murmured, struck with the pathos of her acute self-perception. "You are hard on yourself."

"There was always a spark in me that never quite died out," she insisted again, as if seeking comfort in the thought. Then, suddenly raising her voice piteously: "Oh, why didn't you beat me out of my stupidity! You never said a word—you simply signed cheques and retired into your shell. And I have been clinging to things as they are, so desperately of late. The life always fascinated me—it fascinates me horribly now. I do not know if I have the strength to extricate myself from it."

"The mere form of existence matters little, so long as one's soul is not enslaved. I am convinced there are people who, whilst appearing to be part of the fashionable whirl, have never surrendered their inner selves and live ideal lives."

"Ah, but it is dangerous to coquet with the form unless one is very strong. The form is of iron. It crushes most people—into a sort of jelly."

"You remind me now of your old girlish self," he said, smiling. "I used to be charmed by your pathetic bright way of putting things, and now you give me a touch of it again. If only you could become your old self again!"

Constance let her head drop forward ; her hands lay listlessly on her lap. She had grown quieter now, and was speaking more easily and naturally. There was a long pause, during which both were sunk in reflection.

"So you have not been happy," murmured Hubert at length. "Neither you nor Gwenny—nor even May, perhaps," he added.

"Oh—May! I don't think she allows anything to trouble her very much. The chief drawback to *her* happiness is the fear that it'll one day get about I was only a touring actress. Don't think, Hubert, I am unjust to her. I have always loved and worshipped her, but she has made me suffer. She thinks I did you a great wrong in marrying you. I call you to witness that I refused you, that I resisted with all the strength I was capable of."

"She is more to be pitied than blamed," said Hubert. "She is so high-spirited a child, and I ought not to have allowed her to escape so soon from my personal control. Yet I still cannot believe that all I thought I had built up in her mind was so entirely submerged as soon as she went out into the world. And all this time I have been acquiescing in whatever course it seemed good to you all to adopt, simply because I imagined you were all so perfectly happy. I shall talk to the child—things must be thoroughly threshed out."

"But we must think of Gwenny first," she cried. "We must save her, Hubert. Time enough to deal with the other one afterwards."

He did not answer, being again immersed in thought.

"Oh, Hubert," she cried suddenly. "How pale and worn you are! And what horrible lines there are on your face! I've been mad. I've been a selfish brute. I have never been the wife to you at all you had a right to expect, the wife you deserved to have. I see how you have silently sacrificed yourself and your ideals to me, to the girls. You have always given, given, given; and we—we have always accepted thoughtlessly, callously. We have left you solitary to bear all the burden on your poor back. How we have let you slave and slave!

This great expensive house—ugh! And our dress-makers' and milliners' bills! Flabby fool I have been! Oh, why were you so sweet-natured with us all? O my guilty conscience! O my guilty conscience! I have been blind to your wasted frame, your sunken cheeks. I would give the rest of my life away, Hubert, if only I could recall the mischief I have done."

"You exaggerate," he said soothingly. "My health is tolerably good, and as for work, I have been caught up in the swirl of professional life. In any case I should have done the same work and earned the same money."

"No, no, you are too indulgent. I hate myself when I think of all you have done for me and all you have been to me. Hubert, I want to be the ideal wife to you in future."

"I believe in you," he said simply. "We shall all be inspired for the best."

"Thank you, Hubert. I shall try to be worthy of your generous trust. Your happiness is what I shall hold most dear in life. Only tell me I have not forfeited your love."

"My feelings towards you are the same as they were."

"Ah, Hubert, I don't quite like the way you put it," she protested, in an access of suspicion. "Your words may imply I have never had your love."

"My words had no such subtle intention," he assured her.

"Still, when I come to look back," she persisted, "I don't see how you could have had any real love for a woman such as I. Now that we are opening our hearts, I want you to search yours and tell me the truth."

He was silent, perplexed; not perceiving quickly enough that she, woman-like, had set her mind working on a side-issue, vital to her, and that she was longing to hear him passionately contradict her.

"You do not answer," she exclaimed excitedly. "You do not answer. Of course you did not love me. I have always known the truth in my heart, though carefully cherishing the delusion in my brain. Poor Hubert, you did not know what love was. But the

delusion meant everything to me. Do you know why I have no children of my own?" she went on, with a renewed hysteric vehemence that made him wince. "I made up my mind when I married you that I should deny myself children, because of your great love for these—these that are neither yours nor mine! And I have abided by my determination. I dreamt of our common life flowing on so happily and ideally. I wanted May and Gwenny to have everything undivided, and I dreaded the discords and possible bitternesses that might be occasioned by the intrusion of other little ones."

Her voice, more hoarse than before, modulated itself tragically, was soft with tenderness, rose with passion. Her eyes were fixed on him now, and her face flashed with vivid expressions that thrilled him with their intensity.

He watched her, fascinated; as what she was saying sank into him slowly and then flared into meaning. When she had finished an answering flood of words rushed to his lips, and he did not stop to weigh them.

"Perhaps it is true. I see now that I married you for the children's sake. They needed somebody to be a mother to them. The intensity with which I sought my purpose blinded me, deceived me into imagining I was a young man wooing a bride. I wanted no love for myself. The springtide of life had long since passed, and my hand had almost lost the instinct of the caress—for all save the children."

"Ah," she exclaimed, her voice ringing bitter and triumphant. "I knew it, I knew it."

He had risen to his feet under the stress of the moment.

"But listen, Constance," he urged. "I care for you now, indeed, very much."

She looked up with passionate eyes into his gentle, careworn face. Then she, too, rose and staggered into his arms.

"We shall keep together now, dear, for the rest of life," she whispered.

"Ah, yes. We shall set our house in order together."

"You shall decide, dear. Your will shall be mine."

"Let us go back to the old home. The country will be gloriously fresh, and the hill-sides green and sweet. There we can rest and plan out our lives anew."

"Yes—the old home! It is full of happy memories!" Her eyes sparkled eagerly. "We must throw this nightmare off our shoulders. You must work less, Hubert, in future."

"Listen, darling. I have realized of late that I hate my profession—in my heart I have always been doubtful about it. I somehow feel it has kept me stifled. When I was young the call of humanity sounded in my ears, but, as the years raced by, it grew fainter and fainter. Now it surges up once more through my very blood. I swear to you I am sincere. It is not a small still voice I hear—it is a desolate cry that deepens and deepens. Only the other day I went to a Spitalfields doss-house to succour an old fellow-student whose life broke down long ago. My soul was shaken to its depths. It was all a terrible reminder to me how barren my years had been of generous endeavour. I have searched my heart and conscience, and I cannot keep still any longer. My soul flies to the outcast and the submerged. By giving up my profession now I should be left free to follow the life of service. We should be able to live simply ourselves, and have something to spare for others. Have I your sanction, Constance?"

"Let us work hand-in-hand, dearest; let us follow it together—the life of service!"

His arms were still round her. "Come closer to me, darling," he whispered, and held her to his heart.

IX

MAY slept late after the fatigue and excitement of the party, and, when she came down at last, she found that the others had already breakfasted, Hubert having gone to his chambers ever so long before. Constance was alone in the room reading the newspaper.

The girl took her seat and then noticed a letter for her lying on the table. She could not help reddening as she saw the handwriting. Moreover Constance looked up from her paper just then, and, smiling significantly, informed her that a messenger had brought the letter an hour before.

May did not like this display of interest in her affairs. She was athrill with her big secret—for she had consented not to breathe a word about their engagement to anybody till her *fiancé* should have communicated with his father. But, even apart from that, she would have been strangely shy of sharing it as yet with any one else. It was clear that Constance must have recognized the writing on the envelope, so that her meaning smile revealed the existence in her mind of at least some suspicion as to what was happening.

However, Constance presently resumed her reading, and May boldly tore open the envelope and read the letter.

"DEAREST," it ran ; "I have a very big favour to ask of you. I know you will not refuse, but, all the same, I shall appreciate your compliance more than I can express to you. My request is that you agree to consider our engagement a secret even longer than we agreed last night—till the end of the parliamentary session, in fact. If I

were not tied to town, matters would be different, for I could run down and see my father at once. As perhaps you know, my father has always ruled in his family with a very stern hand. So, after further consideration, I don't at all care to arrange so vital a matter by correspondence. It is hard to foresee how he might take the announcement. He might express himself delighted, but, on the other hand, he might capriciously make up his mind to stand against our engagement, and withdraw all the support on which I am relying for my career. He is wealthy and intends to deal liberally with me, so that, for a younger son, I shall hardly have reason to complain. But, I fear, he has always had ideas of his own about my marriage. Of course, dearest one, if he really knew you, he would worship you as I do, but, as his acquaintance with you is merely superficial, he is more likely than not to be upset by a sudden letter from me—to say nothing of any rumour that might come to him independently. What I purpose is to run home as soon as I am free to leave town—it will be so much more politic for me to tell him personally of our attachment and beg his consent."

She stopped to turn the page, and became aware that her hand was trembling nervously. "But what if he should oppose the marriage even then!" her lips almost murmured. Her face had grown white. She glanced apprehensively towards Constance, who, luckily, was still buried in her newspaper. But the letter seemed to anticipate the girl's thought, for it ran on as follows—

"Not that I have the least fear that any real difficulty will arise. I know my father. He is scrupulously fair-minded, and, in spite of all his reputation to the contrary, almost as tender-hearted as a woman. He won't withhold his sympathy, and, once he has given his consent, he'll be a thousand times the more anxious for our happiness. Only he has always insisted on things going *his* way, and so I must go through the form of consulting him first. As I've already said, far too much depends on the issue for me to risk a letter. I hope, darling, you are not the least bit fatigued this morning. What a delightful hostess Mrs. Ruthven is! And *you* were per-

fectly beautiful and perfectly charming! With deepest and truest love.

"Ever your sweetheart, ARTHUR.

"P.S. I am so happy, dearest."

Her misgivings vanished before his confidence. His concluding sentences made her eyes sparkle and her heart beat faster. She found herself dwelling on them with eager pleasure. It was wonderful that a few simple phrases should sink so deeply into her, should stir her with such exquisite delight.

But for the absurdity of such a proceeding in the presence of Constance, she would have kissed the letter there and then—with an impulsive tenderness that seemed to spring from the very depths of her soul. She realized she was desperately attached to her chosen husband. That terrible pride of hers was at last humbled. She was as if tied hand and foot!

She would have liked to read the letter again from the beginning, but she struggled against the longing, and put the sheets back into the envelope, which she let lie with apparent carelessness beside her plate. Heroically she swallowed some breakfast, eating with studied leisure, and lingering at the table as if she were not dying to slip away. She wanted to be alone with her thoughts, to reread the letter as often as she pleased, to feast her eyes on the words that kept echoing in her mind, and from the contemplation of which, however her mind might wander for a moment, she could not tear herself. "And you were perfectly beautiful and perfectly charming! And you were perfectly beautiful and perfectly charming!"

She had sufficient command of herself to ask Constance if there was any special news in the paper.

"Well, see for yourself," and Constance passed her *The Morning Post*. Then rising, glancing at the clock, and moving towards the door; "By the way, there's only a short paragraph about our affair last night," she added. "You'll find it in small type at the bottom of a column."

By lunch-time May had her answer ready for posting. She accepted absolutely, she assured her Arthur, whatever seemed best to him, and their secret should be as safe as if it had been entrusted to the deep sea. "And by the way, dearest," she went on, "I think I ought to take the opportunity of telling you how I stand. Now that I have written it, my last sentence reads rather strangely. I mean my financial standing—at least I think that's what people call it. Parents are proverbially business-minded when their children's marriages are concerned, and in case your father should desire to know what I am bringing by way of fortune, it is best I should explain at once. An old legacy of five thousand pounds has since, by accumulations of interest, become more than seven, and another thousand pounds, at least, has been put aside for me by my uncle himself—or rather, that is what I have understood the last few years. I have no doubt that my uncle will be as generous as he possibly can, still I can scarcely claim to be bringing you much of a fortune. When I was a foolish little child I thought I had become immensely rich; now, I suppose, I may just regard myself as a genteel sort of pauper."

X

POOR Constance was scarcely able to keep herself up to the heroic pitch at which she had arrived in the opening of hearts between her and Hubert.

Her backsliding, however, was venial. In spite of her earnest desire to see as he saw and to think as he thought, the modes of feeling that had been created in her all these years could not be conquered so abruptly. Thus, when Hubert returned home in the evening, Constance could not help intercepting him in the hall, and pointing with irrepressible excitement to the piles of cards that had been left at the door. But he merely smiled in good-humoured comprehension. Nor did he take it amiss when he found she had been thinking over things all day and was already showing a desire for compromise. Not that she was the less reconciled to beating a quiet and honourable retreat from fashionable life. But she was now anxious that nothing should be altered till the end of the season !

She was ready with several excellent common-sense arguments in support of her suggestion. There would be little gained by an immediate clean cut through everything, so they might as well avoid the attention they must necessarily attract to themselves by their adoption of that policy. Moreover, they were deeply entangled—what with social engagements and all sorts of semi-friendships ; and, as people had been so very nice to them, they, on their part, ought not to do anything which might appear to savour of rudeness or unfriendliness. They could scarcely explain themselves to all and sundry, and it would be hateful to have to invent suitable

fibs. Whereas, by waiting till the end of the season, they could sublet the house and slip away quietly.

As Hubert had already once looked at the position in a similar light, and had of himself been inspired to adopt the very policy, he was content not to offer any opposition to this desire of hers. But, when Constance attempted to follow up her advantage by begging that, in the meanwhile, May should remain "unmolested," he would not concede this new point there and then, saying he must consider further, though for that evening at least he would promise to remain silent.

And so, indeed, the dinner passed without a word being said that might rouse the girls to suspicion that anything had happened between the elders. Constance had to content herself for the moment with the one point she had scored. But she was still in a terrible dilemma. She found herself, in fact, unexpectedly at the helm, and the steering was of the most difficult. And, greatly to her sorrow, there were one or two reservations she saw herself already forced to make from her husband.

In pleading that they might be allowed to continue as they were for the present, she had had to keep back the most potent reason of all—though she was by no means insincere in the reasons she did put forward. It *was* perfectly true that she feared to attract attention—it made her sick and giddy to think of the talk there might be! When people once began to talk, there was no knowing what it might lead to. Things might be raked up about herself! She was not very proud of her own personal history, and though she resented she yet shared May's contempt for it. And then there were one or two chapters in that history with which even May was unacquainted.

But these, after all, were merely minor considerations; the great point was to handle things so that May's marriage might not be imperilled. Constance was well aware the courtship was proceeding—Lady Wycliffe had given her more than one strong hint to that effect. She herself was taking a real maternal interest in the affair, had tasted all the excitement and the joy of prospective

triumph with which a society mother contemplates the attentions paid to her "child" by an eminently satisfactory *parti*. All the woman in her bristled up at the bare idea of endangering so promising a match—she would rather have died than have had it ruthlessly foiled. Indeed, she found herself regretting now that she had said to Hubert anything at all to May's detriment. But it was something to be thankful for that she had not "blurted out" *everything* the night before.

If only she could keep Hubert quiet till all was settled! Once May had given her promise to the young man, Hubert could not require her to break it; but, till the important moment had passed, she had an almost morbid fear that he would consider himself not merely free, but actually in duty bound, to bear the girl away from the "danger." May was now fully grown up and fit to strike out a destiny of her own. Children must always pass out of one's hands, and, in this case, it would be for the best—for would it not simplify matters even for Hubert?

Yet, though the problem of May's marriage seemed the more immediately pressing to her, she was not the less concerned about what was destined to happen in Gwenny's case. And, in a way, that, too, had a distinct bearing on the younger sister's "prospects." Young men's minds often worked mysteriously; they had a way of being unexpectedly put out, of exhibiting an astonishing sensitiveness to all sorts of things—the last things, indeed, one would dream was affecting them. Then one day they would abruptly go their own way without saying a word, leaving one to puzzle out what could possibly have annoyed their susceptibilities. The Roburne family was strictly Protestant, and the young man might well have cause to draw back if Gwenny's conversion became a realized fact.

She herself had been terribly vexed about it; though for years and years in her earlier days her own religion had been of the vaguest, and she had never attached any special importance to the particular form in which she had been brought up. She could not help herself, she argued, but she had "changed." That Gwenny's in-

tentions had come into violent collision with deep-seated feelings and prejudices of her own, was a fact that forced itself only too painfully on her recognition, and she had been not a little alarmed at the apparent calm with which Hubert had received the intelligence. All along she had unaccountably hoped that he would at least be sufficiently incensed to forbid the contemplated "folly"; for she considered the girl had been deliberately tampered with by a set of designing fanatics.

In the intense excitement of her last night's outpouring to Hubert, this, the starting-point of everything, had afterwards got altogether obscured. As he had scarcely expressed himself then on this particular subject, she felt justified in recurring to it without any further delay. Besides, it would be such a relief to have that matter off her hands!

So when Hubert retired soon after dinner to his sanctum, leaving the others to pass one of their rare, quiet evenings in that same cosy room wherein hung the Turner beneath which May had supped with her Arthur the evening before, Constance took the opportunity of following him after a brief interval with a view to at least sounding him as to the attitude he meant to assume.

She found Hubert's mind singularly unruffled, though he had evidently given the subject some consideration. He steadfastly refused to accept Constance's view that this desire of Gwenny's was an inconceivable folly.

"I feel no impulse to oppose her wishes," he declared. "I am certain she is perfectly sincere, and, in fact, I must confess I rather welcome such a proof that her faith has taken such a firm and definite turn. Now that I know how she has chosen to shape her life, I feel distinctly less concern about her. Surely you would not have me go back on the principle I adopted from the beginning—to leave the children with open minds till they should be inspired to choose."

"To choose amid what is good," she fenced.

"Naturally. But if I considered the present choice an evil one, I should be the first to forbid it."

"But her going into a convent! The idea is horrible!"

"You will grow reconciled to it. If it is the only way she can find happiness, then I desire it as much as she herself."

"The child is young—she may be deceiving herself."

"Of course I mean to make certain that she is not deceiving herself."

"But how are we to know that?" she exclaimed eagerly.

"Well, I admit that my ideas about convents are not entirely definite, but I know that a girl has her chances of withdrawing before finally taking the vows. I shall make her promise me that she'll not hold to the idea just out of mere pride if she does not find in the life what she hoped to find."

Constance could see that Hubert meant to be firm, so she did not persist further. Even though she still hated the prospect of Gwenny's leaving them in that way, she had to make up her mind to put the best face on it she could. And, seeing he had work lying on his table, she deemed it best to retire—which she did with a gloomy countenance.

Hubert tried to give his attention again to his papers, but the ingress of Constance had distracted his mind, and he could not help dwelling instead on the conversation he had just had with her. He had been forced to take a side, and he could not but think he had decided rightly, though he was grieved when he considered how deeply Constance felt about it. Well, he could hardly blame her; had he not himself his passionate prejudices?

Ultimately he was impelled by his restlessness to wander upstairs, and, scarcely understanding why, to look into Gwenny's room. Each girl had annexed a personal sanctum that opened into her bedroom, for on the upper floors were several superfluous chambers. He rapped mechanically at the door before entering, though he was almost certain she was still below with the others.

The room was a dainty little place, entirely created by its occupier so as to be an enlargement of one of its

corners, wherein were placed cross-wise a tiny bureau and a spindle-legged chair with a tall, ladder-like back. Two far-stretching rows of books on either side met higher in the angle, yet within comfortable reach of the hand, and were sheltered behind a short embroidered hanging that could be drawn along a brass rod. A large central rug and a few odd chairs sufficed for the rest of the room. On the mantelpiece were some curious and significant relics of the girl's travels—a bronze angel kneeling beside a scroll, but with both wings broken off short, and another strange one of worm-eaten wood, with large wings this time, though the features were entirely worn away. There was also a large wooden cross, incongruously covered with flowers that were inlaid in silver, brass, and mother-of-pearl, and standing on an extraordinary semi-circular base that gleamed with strange heads and scrolls and crowns and lilies. And, on either side, Gwenny had flanked this cross with a porcelain Virgin.

Hubert drew aside the hanging and glanced along the titles of the books—a prettily-bound collection which had accumulated from her tenderest years. Only a few of them indicated the trend of their owner's religious thoughts, and these were for the most part elementary books of the Catholic faith, such as *The Garden of the Soul*, the *Imitation*, and *Master Butler's Catholic Catechism*. More interesting was a small French volume, bound in morocco, which had evidently been picked up on the Paris quays. It was entitled *Méditations et Sentimens sur La Sainte Communion*, and, as appeared from a label pasted inside the cover, had been presented to one, Méline Boulu, at a "Distribution Solennelle des Prix," for excellence in "*analyses*" some sixty years previously!

He replaced the book, and drew the curtain back to its previous position. Then he stole from the room somewhat guiltily. He had been touched by his peep into it. If he was more than ever conscious that Gwenny's life had been going its own way, he felt it had been going daintily, sweetly, quietly, and it seemed

to point naturally to the destiny she desired. The thought of it brought him a deep, suffocating emotion, but did not tear his heart. The idea was too full of peace.

In the meantime, Constance, face to face with her problems, had been stimulated to further reflection. Recognizing now that Gwenny could not be hindered from getting her way, she saw she must surrender with as good a grace as possible, and stifle her repugnance as best she could. So, like a sensible person, she hastened to cast off the gloom to which she had given way, and to take a purely practical view of things. Once she had accepted the idea of putting her own prejudices on one side, she saw that, in view of the manoeuvring that had been forced upon her (but which, nevertheless, she cheerfully undertook for the good of everybody concerned), it was at any rate an advantage to know definitely the state of affairs with which she had to deal. And thus accepting the inevitable, she, with a real genius for generalship, was presently inspired to utilize it as far as possible, to incorporate it, in fact, into her own plan of campaign.

So, with a swift *volte-face*, she set to work at once to make her peace with Gwenny ; and, so far from concealing the fact that she had already forestalled her in bringing the matter to Hubert's knowledge, she did not shrink from implying that she had been instrumental in his decision. She would, therefore, no longer stand in the way, and, when the time came, Gwenny should leave them with her full blessing. One concession, however, she would expect in return—that the matter should remain a family secret for the present, and that no formal step was to be taken till the autumn, the moment for proceeding to be indicated by herself. She promised, however, that the period of waiting should not exceed six months.

Gwenny, though startled at this abrupt change of front, and inclined to be incredulous as to Constance's share in influencing Hubert in her favour, was far too pleased and excited not to assent immediately to the one "mysterious" condition. But she almost at once

divined what was in Constance's mind, having long since recognized the attachment between her sister and Arthur Roburne, and smiled inwardly at Constance's fear that her own plans might hinder that marriage.

"I suppose you have no objection against my speaking to uncle—I should like to thank him."

Constance hesitated, but at once recovered herself, remembering that, if necessary, she could explain away to Hubert the period of waiting she had insisted upon as merely intended to fit in with their general policy of preserving appearances.

"Certainly you may speak to him," she managed to reply promptly. "There is no reason at all why you should not be perfectly open with him now."

Yet, for the rest of the evening, Constance did not give herself up to the elation that might naturally have attended the disposal of so troublesome a difficulty. True, there was one possibly formidable hindrance the less in the way of May's settlement in life, but how would Hubert feel when he realized he was to lose both the children! Poor Hubert! How vexing it was that she herself could not be perfectly frank with him yet! But, in the days to come, she would make up to him for everything—so great should be her devotion, so exceeding what was ever given by woman to man since the world began!

XI

GWENNY, knowing that Hubert was busy, considerately waited till near bedtime before intruding on him. He looked up from his documents as she came within the threshold.

"Isn't it rather early for your good-night kiss?" he smiled in kindly welcome. "But I suppose you were hard-worked last night."

The apology on her lips for disturbing him melted before his wistful glance, his gentle voice.

"Oh, come right in," he continued, divining her purpose. "These papers are only boring me, and I'm rather glad to have a visitor."

"I want to thank you, uncle," she said, advancing to him and kissing him warmly. "That's not for 'good-night' yet," she explained.

"Ah, Constance has already informed you of her conversation with me."

"In my heart I always knew you would never be against me!"

Her face was even paler than usual, and she had a certain air of fatigue. What a frail sister she would make! And yet she curiously looked the part—though a poet's conception of it rather than the reality; a figure rising from ballad or song.

"My dear child," he answered, "your heart told you true. Of course I had not the least idea of how you were being drawn. I almost wish I had known earlier."

"I was never really sure of myself till the last year or so, but I have not been happy all this time, and that helped to destroy my last doubts. I want to get away from this stifling life. I hate it. What they call

pleasure is to me hollow and worthless. Of late I have often longed to come to you, uncle dear—but I was so much away from you, and you were always so distracted and busy. Besides, I was always so timid, and Dearie thought it would make you terribly angry, and upset you. I would rather have given up the idea altogether than have caused you pain.”

“My dear little child,” he said, his heart going out to her; “and, now that you have at last overcome your timidity, I am to lose you!”

“I am so sorry, uncle,” she said, and broke into sobbing.

He rose and placed his hands on her hair caressingly. “You are sure you will be happy?” he asked.

“I shall find peace,” she said. “I love the Faith, and I wish to work for the poor.”

She went on to explain that it was no sensational step she desired to take; she did not have it in mind to join a rigorous sisterhood of severe and unremitting disciplines, but one in which she could turn her energies to good practical purpose, and lead a quiet, useful, dignified life. She described to him the ordinary routine of the days, divided between teaching and visiting the poor and the sick. Such a retirement from the world could only be said to be a nominal retirement, and her family might see her when they wished.

Hubert was glad to be thus enlightened. Her ideas seemed very sensible, and he could approve of them both with relief and satisfaction. There was really little that she had to reveal to him about the past. Through Madame Bartolozzi she had formed a little circle of friends of her own with whom she was very much more in sympathy than with even the most intimate of their fashionable acquaintances. He elicited from her with difficulty some account of her gradual estrangement from the ways and ideas of the others, for she was as loath to insist on the gulf between her and them as she was to breathe the slightest word to their disparagement.

She was ready with all the details of her plans he

could ask for. Her friends would make everything easy for her. Of course she would have first of all to pass over to Catholicism formally; afterwards announcing to her spiritual director at confession her wish to enter the religious life. She would begin as a "novice," and wear "the cap" for six months, then "the white veil" for two years; during which latter period she would be looking forward to taking the final solemn vows, and eventually donning "the black veil." As to her own little fortune, she would wish to have half settled on the order she might enter, and the remainder devoted by him to charity.

There were no obstacles of any kind, but now that he was to lose her, he was anxious to have her stay with him yet a little.

"I have already promised aunt to wait a few months. She does not like the idea of any immediate change."

Hubert smiled, instinctively making the very interpretation Constance had hoped for.

"Well, I want to put to you now a serious question," he presently resumed. He paused for a moment impressively. "Suppose you should, at any time before taking the solemn vows that are to bind you for always, reconsider your position, and desire to come home again?"

"That I can scarcely conceive of, uncle."

"Still the contingency might arise. And, therefore, my dear child, I want you to make me a promise as solemn as the vows themselves."

She waited askance.

"If ever you should not feel sure of yourself, you are to allow no sentiment of pride, or the mere desire to appear firm—even in your own eyes—to prevent you from withdrawing before it is too late."

"I understand, uncle, dear," she said, her eyes glistening; "and, of course, I promise."

XII

FOR the present, then, the Ruthvens presented the same front to the world as heretofore, and the trio pursued their social way (Gwenny joining the others in conscientious fulfilment of her understanding with Constance), each with her own emotions, but betraying no hint of them on the surface.

Meanwhile Hubert's spirit was calmer. The hours his womenkind spent with him were still few, but all three were markedly affectionate and attentive to him now, and he felt they were infinitely closer to him than before.

This emphasized considerateness on their part was easy to understand in the case of Constance and Gwenny, but the tender way in which May now hovered about him at odd moments puzzled him. He did not suppose that she had ever, in her heart, cared for him less warmly; still it was hard to think why, amid these whirling days of gaiety, she should be showing such signs of a possible return to their old companionship. For now, too, she would come to show herself in her finery before going out; and her clinging movements, her swift caresses seemed always to be wistful apologies for her having to dash away the next moment—to be back hours after his usual bedtime. He could only interpret it all as due to an awakening of remorse on her part for her previous neglect of him, and even Constance was content to accept that supposition.

In deference, too, to Constance's wishes, he had put off his meditated little interview with the girl—at least till some promising occasion should arise naturally. He was more disposed to wait now—her renewed tenderness for him might grow, and his task be all the lighter.

On the one point of the girl's future, Constance con-

tinued to keep her own counsel. At the same time she began to be much exercised by the tardiness of the engagement in declaring itself. The young people were certainly not seeing less of each other, nor did there seem any falling off in their friendliness. But there was yet something about their cordiality which was not quite of the right shade, and which set Constance wondering tremulously whether Lady Wycliffe were not grievously mistaken. So far as her own experience went, that sort of cordiality never led to anything!

The truth, of course, was that the pair were studiously careful not to rouse any suspicion or gossip, heroically submitting to the restraint thus imposed on them. Yet, save for a single drawback, the girl was amazingly happy. She was certainly intoxicated with life—all she set the highest value on was to be hers!

She not only saw the young man through the glamour of love; there was also the glamour of his coming career as a great politician or diplomatist. She chose to believe in that blindly—without it her visions would have been bereft of half their colour. But, perhaps most desirable of all, shone his inalienable birth-right of deep-rooted social position. Her marriage would open to her a path to the zenith of the ambitions that had filled her dreams almost from childhood. Not only was she to be of the very fabric of that world into which she had now only a not very comfortable sense of having risen, but she was determined to wield power, to blossom ultimately into a great leader of Society. There was even a possibility, not so very remote, of an important title falling to her; but she was not cold-blooded enough to dwell on that, save at moments, and then it was an involuntary insinuating thought that gained her attention, hardly a deliberate one.

When, however, she allowed herself to acknowledge the proverbial bitter that was mixed with her sweets, it certainly exercised a most disturbing influence on the harmony of her mood. Often, in conversation with her Arthur, she had found herself approaching very delicate and perilous ground. Having, as yet, had insufficient

experience of the world, he had always taken her position for granted—she was the niece and adopted daughter of an eminent Queen's Counsel, he had met her in a very exclusive circle, her home was refined and artistic. He had never dreamt otherwise than that her social eligibility, even for a man of his exalted blood, was unquestionable. And thus, whenever any chance reference to her father and mother had arisen, her heart had beat faster with fright, and she had had a distinctly guilty sense of the inferiority of her origin. Her instinct had been to glide over the point quickly—they had both died when she was ever so little. Once, indeed, she had been impelled to throw out casually that her father had been a "physician," though she regretted it immediately. If it had occurred to him to interrogate her pointedly, she would, perhaps, have made no reservations, painful as it might have been to confess that her maternal grandmother had let cheap lodgings in a Bloomsbury back street, and that her mother had cut her throat in a fit of mad excitement. As it was, she merely refrained from enlightening him on these and other points.

Inwoven as her romance was with so much that was worldly, she yet loved it for its own sake, and there were times when she despised herself for her "insincerity and cowardice." But, on the other hand, her vulgarer instincts fostered in her an acute dread lest the truth, by whatever means, should ever penetrate to him. This possibility, vivid in her consciousness, and touched to tragic importance, she constantly strove to shut her eyes against. The epoch of her childhood was so dim and distant that the present May Ruthven had only the ghostliest connection with it; yet, as she could not help admitting that the connection existed, she resented the fact as a rank injustice.

And thus, in the attempt to obliterate from her mind so disagreeable an element, she tried to live more intensely in every moment, throwing herself heart and soul into the movement of life, and gratifying to the utmost her keen zest for pleasure.

XIII

MAY'S ears were always remarkably acute now, especially for any talk whereof she imagined she or her family might be the subject, and in this way she was destined one day to overhear an extremely curious conversation.

She had been shopping in Bond-street with Constance, and, as the afternoon was a blazing one, they had just descended at one of the tea-rooms for refreshment. Almost on the doorstep, May just escaped a couple of elderly gallants, who were close upon them, and who were in the habit of boring her with playful compliments and banter. Constance, however, was caught, stayed a moment or two, and ended by asking them to lunch, returning to her carriage to note the engagement in her book, which had to be fished out from her reticule. Meanwhile, May passed into the tea-room, and took a seat at a table not far from the entrance, so that Constance might be able to see her at once. A tall Japanese screen that rose in front of her, gave her a certain cosy privacy, but she could hear feminine voices talking with an almost painful distinctness at another table behind it. Indeed, she had vaguely caught sight of the two speakers as she had entered.

At first, though she could not help hearing every word, she did not want to listen, and so she did not catch the drift of what was being said. But suddenly the sound of her own name smote on her ear violently, and she found herself following the voices in spite of herself.

"I hear the Ruthvens' party the week before last was such a brilliant success—at least my sister says so in her column in *The Loyal Lady*. Were you there?"

"Not I! We had cards through Mrs. Geoffrey, who told me Mrs. Ruthven had positively begged her to bring us. However, one can't be too careful now-a-days, and I don't see why, just because Lady Wycliffe takes it into her head to patronize the woman, we should all be running to dance attendance on her. A fine stroke, though, their getting Almusa—I wonder how it was managed! But that sort of person generally goes down as suddenly as she goes up. Only just wait a little."

"Why, who *are* the Ruthvens? You astonish me. I thought they were of the right sort."

A peal of cultivated, silvery laughter rang behind the screen.

"The right sort! A mere caprice, my dear, on the part of Lady Wycliffe! This Ruthven was a *protégé* of hers when he was a young man. She paid for his education, or something of the sort, and occasionally had him to lunch. He got on in his profession, and she had him to dinner. And, now that he has become a Q.C., she has taken up his wife and his nieces—quite nice girls, everything considered, though one of them makes herself as much at home in Society as if she were a princess of the blood. I don't question but that Lady Wycliffe means very well, but she really ought to be more careful whom she forces on other people."

"But there doesn't seem to be anything—you know what I mean, really anything—against the people."

"My dear, the whole business is a rather amusing scandal. Lady Wycliffe does not even seem to have made the least attempt to inquire into these people's antecedents. This Mrs. Ruthven, at the time her husband grew infatuated with her, was an actress in the lower ranks of the profession—just starving along, you know—and I have the best of authority for saying that she was no better than she should be. She had previously been living with a married man, and she only left him to marry this Ruthven."

"You astonish me!"

"I assure you, my dear, it's as true as gospel—and would be bad enough in all conscience, but there's still

worse to follow. This Ruthven's brother"—here the voice impressively lowered itself an octave—"appears to have married a common street-walker, who drove the poor fellow to suicide. The uncle then took the little girls, the mother not being a fit person to be entrusted with their upbringing. My dear, it's the solemn truth—I have it on unexceptionable authority. Nobody knows what became of the mother, and, indeed, it's likely enough she's still rolling about somewhere. She'll turn up some day—they always do, my dear—and then perhaps the Ruthvens 'll feel a bit uncomfortable for awhile."

May rose, all afire, and hurried into the street again, almost colliding with Constance, who was just about to enter.

"What's the matter with you, child?" said Constance, staring at her.

"I feel overcome by the heat—all of a sudden," said the girl. "It is too terribly close in there. Let us go home at once."

XIV

THERE was a dance that evening at which Arthur Roburne was expecting to find her, but May shut herself up in her room instead, on the plea that she was too indisposed to stir out. Nothing to be alarmed about—mere fatigue. The suggestion of a doctor only evoked her scorn. She would lie still, she said, and try to compose herself, perhaps even get a little sleep. This in order to be left to her own thoughts; for even friendly solicitude was to be dreaded as an irritation.

As a result, Constance and Gwenny, after various fluctuations, also decided to pass the time at home. Meanwhile May was brooding and suffering. If it was possible to hear such talk quite at random, then—then——

The world seemed to sink away from beneath her, and a horrible, choking dread almost made her swoon. Again and again she gathered her strength together, but each time the memory of that vile gossip struck her like a knife.

About nine o'clock her reflections were interrupted by a rapping at the door. Her petulance at being disturbed vanished immediately when she perceived the visitor was Hubert.

"How flushed you are, little May!" he exclaimed, his voice full of anxiety.

She gave a forced little laugh. "You look as concerned, uncle dear, as if I had broken a limb. The afternoon's shopping wore me out—it was so stuffy everywhere. I dare say I shall be all right again in the morning."

He came into the room, and closed the door behind him.

"I'm sorry you have to lose your dance to-night. Still, I suppose there are a great many more to come. May I not sit down a moment?"

She pushed forward an arm-chair for him, then languidly dropped into another herself.

"Of late I've been feeling the heat in chambers terrifically," he continued. "The mere idea of shopping turns me dizzy. Why do you do it?"

"Why? I never thought about it. I suppose it's natural."

He made a wry face.

"Even father Preston likes it!" she added, as if that bore out her view.

"Merely an acquired taste of his to counteract his metaphysical tendencies. He strives to escape from the infinitely big by burying himself in the infinitely little."

"I don't quite grasp that," she said, without any attempt to do so. "My brain is rather muddled to-night. But it sounds as if it *were* the right explanation—it's Prestonish through and through."

Hubert smiled. "I'm glad to see my little girl in such good spirits. I was nervous in spite of your assurance. Dances and that sort of thing are all very well in their way, but I've no doubt you'll be finding it a refreshing contrast to spend some time with me just quietly in the country. First a good rest amid pure air and sweet surroundings, and then, when we both recover our activity, we'll indulge in some of those long walks we used to have together in the olden days—do you remember, little girl?"

Her head swam again, and she momentarily forgot where she was and what she was talking about. The vast feeling of misery she was trying both to keep down and to dissimulate, surged up heavily.

"Yes, yes," she said vaguely, with a far-off sense of meadows and buttercups and daisies. Then, as the oppression passed off, she gathered her wits again with a swift effort. "Oh, those walks—they were simply splendid!" Her eyes sparkled, and her face took on

an expression of joyous reminiscence. She was like a sick actress struggling through her part.

"I suppose you are somewhat tired of town and dancing by now?" he suggested tentatively.

"Oh, no," she answered, dizzily losing her sense of the drift of the conversation. "I love town, and I like dancing almost better than any other amusement."

"Curious our tastes should be so different," he ventured. "I used to care very little about dancing in the old days, and I am never quite happy in town."

"I really can't understand anybody not liking town," she said. "Oh!" She gave almost a moan, and closed her eyes.

"I am tiring you, dear," he exclaimed, jumping up. "I'll send you the maid, and you must go to bed at once. Forgive my thoughtlessness. Good-night, dear little one."

She kissed him affectionately, and then, unexpectedly, a second time. As he moved towards the door, she called to him again with a last forced effort at coquetry, charming him with her freshest smile.

"And, uncle dear, you must take me for a walk soon. Why not here in London? Perhaps you will find that you can be happier in town than you think." Her eyes played at him roguishly.

"Well, why not to-morrow—if you feel equal to it?" he rejoined, staying a moment with his hand on the door-knob. "To-morrow is Saturday, remember. We can fill the whole afternoon, and have tea out. . . . Besides," he added, deciding to make the announcement, "I want particularly to have a long talk with you, and that will give us a splendid opportunity."

"A really serious talk?" she murmured, struck by the sudden gravity of his manner.

"Well, yes—quite a serious talk," he assured her.

She made a moue.

XV

IN the morning May had a letter from Roburne, and the sight of it renewed her distress to the full. As part of the compact between them, letters had to be rare for the time being. Her feeling of foreboding about this one was therefore accentuated.

"DEAR MAY,"—he wrote—"I turned up at the Cairds' particularly early to-night, and, what is worse, stayed particularly late, as I did not care to give up hope of your arrival, even at the fag-end. I wonder what kept you away, and how it is you did not contrive to let me know somehow—surely you might have wired a word. I bored myself to death all the evening. I am the more vexed at missing you, as, in the ordinary course of events, there isn't much chance of my seeing you again this week, and there are important reasons why I must see you immediately. So, in sheer desperation, I must propose something alarmingly indecorous. Cannot you meet me to-morrow (Saturday) about five in the afternoon, say in the Embankment Gardens near Charing Cross Station? You might take out a book, and be reading on one of the seats. I'll find you in a moment. I know you are free to go about as you please, and that is a very convenient place for talking at our ease. If you cannot come, a wire will find me at Eaton Square up to four o'clock.

"Yours, ARTHUR."

She read through the note with beating temples, accepting as a matter of course the interpretation that came uppermost in her mind. She made no attempt

to examine each phrase searchingly, to explain away his coldness. His hurried, slap-dash manner seemed just to indicate a non-committal policy; could be explained away as mere hasty scribble, or stand as significant in case a break should follow.

Of course he had heard the gossip, and desired to know exactly what amount of truth was in it. Vile and exaggerated as it all was, she would have to make clear to him the foundation of fact on which these rumours rested—that is, if she could make up her mind to meet him at all. Her feeling now was principally one of anger and bitterness. The intense pride which had carried her through life with high head and elastic step could react against the blow in no other way. She was angry with herself at having had a mother of such humble extraction, angrier still with that mother for having quitted this world in so violently unconventional a fashion. And as for Constance—of whose history she had guessed (and guessed wrongly) more than she had ever been able to discover, and against whom she had come to nourish an heroic resentment for having killed Hubert's mother (who after all had been a gentlewoman)—it was hard that a person like that should be so closely bound up with her own life as now to spoil it for her. How foolish of Hubert to have allowed himself to get entrapped by a woman who had already besmirched herself!

With such gossip going about, it was plain they could not retain their position in society—nor ought they to desire it. That would not matter to Gwenny, who did not care for things, and who meant to pass her life in teaching and praying in a convent! But she herself had no turn for the conventual existence. She was to lose everything—she who cared for everything!

At breakfast she smilingly asserted that she was almost quite recovered again, but would not go out for her morning ride. The afternoon's promenade, for which she had engaged herself to Hubert, would be exercise enough for her. To distract her thoughts she busied herself during the next hour or two with anything

that offered, and found herself arranging her books, and sorting her letters and papers and destroying an endless number of them. It was as if she were being impelled by some presentiment of tragedy to put her affairs into order!

Suddenly she remembered that Hubert, too, had announced he had something serious to say to her, and she laughed nervously. All in front of her was a black chaos—she would not let her mind go forward and trace out possibilities. And though she had not yet told herself so in words, she had in her mind already recognized the utter futility of seeing Arthur again. Her perception of certain aspects of his character had been greater than she had ever admitted to herself, and, in the depths of her soul, she knew only too well he would never stand by her. Moreover, even if she had desired to go to meet him, she could not be at all sure of parting from Hubert in time to be punctually at the rendezvous, or even to get there at all that day.

Yet at no moment during the morning could she bring herself to slip out to send the young man a telegram, either accepting or rejecting the suggested meeting; though her silence, leading him to expect her, was bound to result in his kicking his heels wrathfully and feeling she had made a fool of him. For she was still struggling with herself mentally, and could not bring herself to utter a definite "yes" or "no."

At lunch she again presented a smiling face, and thus far none of the others manifested the least suspicion that anything was amiss. She almost pitied their sleek happy ignorance as, nervous and overwrought, she grew comparatively hilarious and overflowed with gay laughter.

"Well, uncle," she asked, as she jumped up from the table at last. "Where are you going to take me?"

He was pleased she hadn't forgotten the arrangement.

"So soon after lunch! Will it be good for our digestions?" he laughed.

"You should have thought of that before. As for myself, I am unaware that I possess such a thing. But

I'll be generous—you shall have ten minutes for your coffee."

There was a breeze blowing when they left the house, so that it was pleasant to saunter in the sunshine. May, despite herself, could not help being heartened a little by the stimulus of the town she so loved; and, even for Hubert, the streets momentarily took on a brighter aspect.

They strolled through Regent Street, the Haymarket, across Trafalgar Square, and down Whitehall to Westminster. Then, passing the Houses of Parliament, they struck the Embankment, and followed it along Milbank and past the sordid genteel mansions of Pimlico. It was dominant in her mind that they were leaving further and further behind them the place of rendezvous fixed by Arthur Roburne. Of course it was only natural for Hubert to turn his back on the Temple and walk in the direction away from it, but still the fact that they were so going was curiously significant; and it pleased her to persuade herself that fate was deciding for her! However, she was meanwhile doing her best to chat amusingly, and she fortunately found her companion easy to entertain, for he smiled and laughed incessantly.

The neighbourhood was growing dingier each moment, and suddenly she stood still and looked all round her and over the parapet of the river. An unbroken range of warehouses and factories towered across the water, that lay brown and thick under the caressing sunshine. Blackened houses stretched endlessly on their right, with gloomy side-streets at intervals. She shuddered.

"How depressing it is just here!" she exclaimed. "The sunshine seems a mockery."

"How so?" he said, with sad memories of his recent excursion to the Spitalfields lodging-house. "This is not at all bad. Indeed, for London it is quite good."

She shivered again. "You are prejudiced against London, and always were."

"I think, little girl, you are the prejudiced person! I am of those who point out that certain things are bad because they desire improvement; whereas are you not

of the majority who will not see the badness and insist that we others are only mischief-makers? 'Fouling one's own nest' is the absurd time-honoured way of putting it. Highly effective, no doubt, but it virtually declares that to draw attention to the foulness is the same thing as having made the foulness."

She listened, taken aback at this abrupt attack, though his tone was of the kindest.

"Oh, this must be the serious subject about which we were to talk! But why such a strange choice, uncle?"

"No, it is not a strange choice," he declared. "I have my purpose. If I can show a radical error exists in your mind on one important point, you will be the more ready to believe that you are in error on many other important points."

"But why just now, uncle?" she asked mystified.

"That will become clear to you as we proceed."

"This is all very unexpected," she said. "Of course I know our ideas don't quite agree. I used to think more your way when I was little."

"I feel complimented!" He spoke with marked reproof.

She smiled in spite of herself. "Now you are getting cross. But I don't repent," she cajoled. "You are always so charming when you are cross."

She was able to win the mastery over him, but it was only for a moment this time, for presently he hardened himself against all her pretty arts and returned sternly to his point.

"Seriously, May, I *am* cross. Am I to take your word for it that you are still going to find me charming?"

"I begin to feel quite nervous. I can see it in your face—you mean to read me a long sermon about everybody's being equal and all that sort of thing."

She was not intensely interested. Her mind was too distracted, and she was weary and heart-sick after her long night of tossing about. To have remained brooding in her room would have suited her better than this apparently abstract conversation that was now

being forced upon her. Had her sorrow been other than it was, she might even now have been impelled to confide in the one soul she still loved best in all the world. But she had been wounded deep, and her rebellion against all the doings and events of long ago that had resulted in crushing her now, involved a certain amount of resentment against *him*. She had thus no impulse to open her heart to him; she even shrank from anticipating events by telling him of the terrible slanders she had overheard. So she took up the conversation with just the captious fag-end of her mind, yielding up the rest of herself to the intense reckless bitterness which had again asserted itself, and which grew as each step took them further from the point in London that was most vivid to her.

"You attribute to me all the false opinions, plausibly invented and attributed to people of my kind of convictions by people of your kind of convictions," pursued Hubert coolly. "I do not say everybody is equal, only that if anybody *is* equal, let him be accepted as such. As for the long sermon, it is quite conceivable it might do you good. Physic, I believe, is more or less disagreeable, yet there are times when its administration is indispensable."

He still spoke kindly, even half bantering, nevertheless he made her feel now he meant no jest.

Yet that he was serious in the deeper sense she had not yet realized.

"Oh dear!" she thought; "just to choose this moment to torment me with his radicalism! Bother, bother, bother!"

"But perhaps I ought not to compare my sermon with physic. It is not impossible you may actually find pleasure in listening to me. You used to, once upon a time."

"You began by frightening me to-day."

"I am sorry—I did not mean to do that. Only, my dear child, it is naturally difficult for me to make a new beginning without appearing to be a little abrupt. We have drifted so far apart. When I come to think of it

we have not really talked together for several years—not in the way, that is, we once used to.”

She did not respond to the yearning in his voice, did not even perceive it.

“Are you angry with me?” she asked in a weary indifferent tone.

“No, not angry,” he answered slowly; “but in a way disappointed and dissatisfied.”

A strange expression passed across her face; she felt persecuted.

“I am sorry, but I feel very innocent.”

They had by now left Westminster ever so far behind them. She would certainly not retrace her steps that day!

Arthur would wait some time, and then go away disgusted and disappointed. Well, she, too, was disgusted and disappointed!

Just then they went past the end of a bleak Pimlico street—respectable with porticoes and areas and tall windows—down which was coming a train of wedding carriages, gaily decked out, the bridal carriage harnessed with a pair of splendid greys. At every area-gate down the long street, maidservants in twos and threes were talking in awed whispers and all looking intently in the same direction. Hubert had passed on without glancing to that side, and May averted her eyes and kept pace with him.

“It is neither a question of innocence or guilt,” he responded. “I do not say who is at fault, but I cannot hide from myself that I am bitterly disappointed in you. You are something very different from what I always hoped you would grow up to be.”

It was hard on her, she felt, to be thus attacked. The captiousness of that bit of herself which was engaged in the conversation was increasing each moment. Why did he not stop tormenting her?

“This is all so unexpected,” she repeated; “but I cannot be otherwise than I am, although I am sorry not to be the somebody else who would please you better.”

“I repeat I am not finding fault,” he assured her more

gently, conscious of his own short-comings and that he had hardly the right to chide her. "I only want to enlist your sympathetic interest. I cannot believe that the person with whom I am dissatisfied is really yourself—the little May who was once everything in the world for me!"

"Naturally I am not the little May. One grows. But, even so, I don't think my nature has changed so very greatly. I am ever so much more experienced and wiser and all that, and——"

"And you've made up your mind about ever so many things. That's just what makes you superficially the person that grieves me."

"You mean our views about things would not agree—which is exactly what I said myself just before. Why, uncle," she protested; "you always used to encourage me to form my own opinions!"

"I had a right to hope you would form them within certain limits. Freedom does not mean freedom to go wrong. But I am not merely concerned about your opinions—or rather convictions. What concerns me most is the selfish life which, I have no doubt whatever, is based on those comfortable convictions of yours."

He spoke in all meekness, conscious she might well demand what wonderful benevolence had been practised in his life, what shining example of altruism had he set her! Nor did he feel such argument the less keenly because it did not occur to her to employ it. As for the girl, the words "selfish life" had stung her, but not into argument. Selfish life, indeed! She could have laughed when she thought what she was suffering at that moment. Her face hardened.

"Cannot we get home again?" she asked, her voice distorted in the effort to avoid a moan. "Please call that handsome. I am so tired."

He mistook her manner for petulance—half insolent as well. Constance was right in what she had said, he thought; the girl was utterly spoilt. He looked at her and caught the hardness in her face, and it made him think of her grandmother's granite hardness.

"I do not believe you are tired, and I must ask you to listen to me," he said sternly. "Meanwhile, if you so prefer, we can turn our steps towards home. I can say all I wish very quickly, and leave you for the present to ponder over it."

She made no reply, but her face hardened even further and she set her teeth. Though in her heart she had never meant to go to Arthur, and even though she had already openly told herself that she was letting circumstances decide for her, she yet began to nurse a further and absurdly unjust anger against Hubert for having made it impossible for her to keep the rendezvous. Both distinctly felt now that a critical moment had arrived; and this perception made the girl—by now grown unreasoningly reckless—the less disposed to try to soften him. Life was now so worthless, she had been struck so hard, it seemed only the fit thing that she should hold herself to be struck again.

He made as if to turn back the way they had come, but the thought of Arthur, who would soon be waiting for her some three miles further down the Embankment, struck her sharply again and made her cry—

"No, no, uncle. I am sick of walking past those horrible streets. Let us cut up towards Kensington Gardens and get home that way."

She herself led the way up the next turning.

He recommenced the onslaught.

"I wanted you to grow up a true lady, but you prefer to live as a sham one."

He waited to hear what she had to say to that, but she made no response. Then, stung into angry expostulation, he spoke out at last—with feeling, almost with tears, and with the sense of performing a sacred duty. It was a nightmare, this life they had slid into leading, and it oppressed him, revolted him. He did not mean to sacrifice his conscience any longer to this low type of happiness, dependent on superficial gratifications. What had become of her mind—not to speak of her soul?

"You have grown into a snob—a snob of snobs," he said passionately; "but my love for you still clings to

the hope that your deeper self will throw it all off. This foolish ostentatious existence, this running after the people who have possession of the social stage—and simply for that reason—is loathsome to me. My whole nature is up in arms against it. I hate my profession, I hate the money I have earned. I want to breathe a purer air. I will no longer foster the selfishness of your days, your gluttony for pleasure! Is not the world full of poorer sisters whom you might have thought of helping?"

She listened with burning cheeks yet callous heart. What was life to her? she laughed inwardly. What cared she about her poorer sisters? Let them starve, let the whole world starve, or be smashed to pieces! What would it matter to her? She only wanted to close her eyes, to sleep—to sleep in peace!

Yet, somehow, she felt she must now argue with him, impelled to wound him, despite all her indifference to this conversation as to everything else. And she argued amazingly—flauntingly cynical and superior, defending her own mode of existence, defending luxury and the worldly life. The masses of people were only inferior animals, she declared, fit only to black her boots. The world was so made; let the slaves labour!

Hubert's heart sank, and the torture of his passion so increased that he contained himself only with difficulty, attuned himself outwardly to the grey respectability of these dingy streets. So she *was* then like her grandmother (though without her redeeming piety and charity), hard as granite and shrewdly snobbish. In that moment, too, he seemed to behold even her mother's features flashing strangely through her own, and he recognized Agnes's stubborn pride and her lust for "life."

"You are absolutely heartless," he cried bitterly; "and vulgar, too, though you may not suspect it. You care for nothing save to amuse yourself."

"Ah, you would prefer me to be like Gwenny, and shut myself up for life in a convent."

"She at least will lead a useful life of service. She loves humanity."

"She has strange tastes. How can one love *that*?"

She tossed her head contemptuously towards the opposite side-walk, where a poor creature hobbled along in a dirty red ragged petticoat and gaping boots, her white hair hanging in strange disorderly curls, her face pock-marked and wrinkled.

Hubert's passion passed as by magic into pity. He did not know which he pitied the more—the young girl or the aged woman!

"Yes, one can love even that," he said softly. An irresistible impulse carried him across the street. He stopped the half-starved woman, spoke to her kindly, and ended by pressing a little money into her hand and promising to help her further.

She called a blessing after him, her aged eyes wet, her hands and body shaking. May had remained waiting defiantly, with curling lip and sneering smile. Hubert rejoined her and they resumed their walk without a word. At the top of the street they met the same procession of wedding carriages which had come by another route, and they could not help observing the people inside them—the men with strangely varying beards and whiskers and features, all wearing glossy high hats and small black ties and large shirt-fronts; the women, buxom and matronly, holding big bouquets.

Some clock struck five just then. At that actual moment Arthur was waiting for her miles away! Well, let him wait! She once more turned her eyes away from the wedding procession.

Hubert did not fail to observe the movement.

"No doubt they are too low for your attention."

"They certainly do not strike me as aristocratic."

"Well, you yourself can hardly lay claim to aristocracy," he reminded her. "Your own extraction was humble enough!"

"It was, indeed," she thought, but she made no further answer.

They walked home in silence. It was the first quarrel of their life.

XVI

AT home they retired to their respective rooms, Hubert with a rude sense of disillusionment and all but shattered. But the brooding mind of the girl, stupefied by calamities of which Hubert knew nothing, had not yet grasped the import of the clash between them. What had happened that afternoon was quite new to her experience, but its blackness was lost in the deeper blackness of the tragedy generally. Though it was even now dawning upon her that a great change had abruptly come in her feelings for Arthur, she could not keep her mind from engaging itself with the picture of her lover vainly and angrily searching for her. Of course he would interpret her silence as a full corroboration of the vile stories that were going the round, and would abandon all further desire to hear any explanation from her. And even if suspending judgment, he would throw up everything just the same, she felt sure, through sheer fading of the impulse of justice on which he might well feel he had already acted sufficiently.

Nevertheless she was haunted by the odd fear (which she well knew to be without reason) that he might yet call at the house, and she therefore informed the maid she would not be well enough to come down to see anybody—whoever it might be! Meanwhile she was racked by the strain of awaiting this more than remote possibility.

Yet she was realizing more and more that she no longer cared for him. Emotions, like people, may find their ending violently. Amid all this stress her love for him had suddenly ceased—it had been throttled by her pride. She felt as if she had been touched by a magic wand and released from the sway of a great illusion.

For, in spite of all that had occurred to humiliate her, her pride was still even greater than his, she told herself, and she was not going to stoop and humble herself before anybody. Nay, more, if he were to go down on his knees now and beg her to marry him, she would most certainly refuse. Not that there was the slightest chance of his exhibiting any such magnanimity—as she well knew. Still she could not keep her mind from imagining some such interview, till at last she almost came to believe in it. The minutes became long tracts of agony, and her heart leapt tremblingly whenever she heard a passing hansom. Yet towards dinner-time, she roused herself, dressed carefully, and descended to face the table brazenly, with an arrogant freshness of countenance and spirits that was almost miraculous. Over the meal Hubert sat repressed and sullen, but May chatted away with an apparent unconsciousness of anything abnormal!

Later, she paid dearly for the effort, and the evening, moreover, was a renewal of anxious waiting and speculation which she knew to be absurd.

But if Arthur did not come, the last post brought her another letter from him. "How reckless of him!" she thought mockingly. "Two letters in one day. Never rains but it pours."

She locked the door illogically behind the retiring maid. Excited as she had been till now, that was nothing compared with this dizzy moment. Yet the letter could contain no surprise for her—her palpitation only marked the moment of the crisis.

All, in fact, was just as she had supposed. Arthur began with petulant complaint. He was evidently very angry; quite at a loss, as he put it, to understand what was implied by this continued and apparently deliberate avoidance of him. He had simply desired to inform her that she and her family were being finely talked about. Obviously the untarnished honour of his house could not be associated with the least sully breath of scandal. As for himself, he was not altogether disinclined to stand by her, if these stories were merely

malicious—though, in any case, now that scandal had got about, he feared his father's opposition would prove unsurmountable. On the other hand, if the gossip now current had any foundation in fact, she would herself, as a sensible girl, be able to see how near Lady Wycliffe's indiscreet acquaintanceship with her family had come to bringing a blameless young man to the verge of a catastrophe—a young man whose disinterestedness (at any rate so far as the question of a suitable fortune was concerned) she would readily admit.

Not one line of sympathy for her, she noticed ; merely a roundabout indication that she ought to release him. Evidently his diplomatic training was proceeding apace !

She felt like fainting, as she suddenly realized again in its whole import what had befallen her. Indifferent as she might be about an affection that was now dead, she was still overwhelmed by the sense of the sudden tragic alteration in her whole position. She saw her imperious ambitions crumbled to dust. But she set her lips, dashed some cold water over her face, and forced herself to sit down to write him a brief note at once.

"DEAR ARTHUR,"—she said—"It is really generous of you not to be 'altogether disinclined to stand by me,' but it would scarcely be right of me to put such a strain on your heroism. Therefore, with your kind permission, I will leave you to stand alone—that is, so far as I am concerned—as I feel sure that the vacant place at your side will readily be filled by somebody happier than myself both in fortune and in immunity from patronage and scandal. Confidently wishing you every success in your diplomatic career,

"I remain, Yours truly,

"MAY RUTHVEN."

Her impulse had been to write bitinglly, but she thought better of it after a few lines, and preferred to cut the letter short.

Tears came as she addressed the envelope—came as a relief. For some minutes she yielded herself to the sobs that could not be restrained.

Lady Wycliffe's patronage! So this was the humiliation she had been destined for! She patronized!—she with her pride! She who had taken it for granted that her irresistible fascination entitled her to queen it over the highest! She was clever enough to see the situation in a clear light—how Constance's big and brilliant party had made them a mark for this irresponsibly spiteful scandal, this nightmare distortion of the truth!

Then came a convulsive moment of revolt. She was sick, she cried out to herself, of the terrible swirl of emotion in which she had been living; she was sick of the degrading sensation of lying crushed and helpless. No, no, she would not endure it any longer; she would rather be dead altogether!

And then the girl's irrepressible spirit leapt up again, and she drew herself together in all her stubborn pride, seeing at that moment the one possible way of redeeming her life. She was in the position of the desperate gambler, and, though the stakes to be won were those she had once already recklessly disdained in the full flood of her prosperity, they seemed to her wonderfully desirable now, and to be well worth the trying for. If she failed, then she would be content to have risked everything on the one throw.

With quick decision she changed her evening dress for an ordinary day frock, bathing her face and temples with eau-de-cologne. Then, glancing at her watch, she arranged her hat, threw a light cloak over her shoulders, and hurriedly went down-stairs.

There was nobody about in the hall, so she slipped out into the street, glad there was no necessity to murmur the words almost on her lips: "I am just running to the post-office."

Instead, she dropped her letter into the nearest pillar-box, then took a hansom to Jermyn Street, determined, with characteristic impulsive dash, to put her destiny to the test without a single moment's delay. As she was rattled along, odd recollections of other visits to Preston in years gone by mingled with her anxious speculation as to whether she should find him at his

chambers. His sitting-room up four flights of stairs was a queer nest—she had a vivid picture of Preston lounging in one of those large comfortable arm-chairs in red leather, the incongruity of which amid such dilettant and eccentric surroundings had always struck her. It was a relief, she found, to let her over-strained mind dwell idly on this and other trivial details.

The familiar shop on the ground floor was shuttered and gloomy. She rang the bell of the door at the side, and the same nasty man answered her as of old. As usual he was reeking of alcohol, and leered at her with a puffed purplish countenance, from which shone an arrogant consciousness of the profits of the long-leased "commodious upper part," tempered by the humility of valeting and boot-blackening.

He did not know if Mr. Preston had gone to his club that evening, but would see. Anyway he could run round the corner to St. James's Street, and ask for him at the club door. She expressed her thanks, whereupon he gave her a knowing glance, full of prudence, with depths beyond depths of meaning; as if to indicate her reputation was perfectly safe in his keeping, that, as one who had let chambers for gentlemen for a score of years and upwards, he had had lots of experience of that sort of thing, and was not in the least astonished to see her.

He left her standing in the tiny stuffy corridor, and disappeared up the sharp turn of the narrow flight of stairs that began only a few feet from the door. She felt rather disgusted that rich bachelors could put up with such places, and was glad to find diversion in the thought.

Soon she heard the man descending, and presently he announced to her that Mr. Preston was at home. She at once followed him up the four flights, smiling her thanks as she passed into the sitting-room that flashed again on her in all its olden familiarity.

Preston himself, sunk in a deep arm-chair (just as she had imagined him), was engaged in the mild occupation of drinking tea, one end of his table being laid in primitive fashion. In the fender a copper kettle steamed over a spirit-lamp.

"I'm caught indulging my vice!" he exclaimed pleasantly, as he rose and came forward to shake hands. He exhibited no sign of surprise.

She, however, was hardly prepared to be so taken for granted, and had to collect herself to meet him on even ground.

"Call it something prettier than that, please," she managed to flash back. "Because you may be inspired to hospitality, and that would hardly be a nice thing to offer me."

"Will 'virtue' do? Used not our grandfathers to say that all virtues carried to excess were vices. I was merely carrying it to excess. Fact is, I've taken to drinking of late. Whenever I feel bored at the club of an evening—and that is pretty frequently—I come home and dispose of three large cups, pale golden-brown, and no sugar or milk. I have not yet got through the first, so there is still an ample store of hospitality at my disposal."

She had dropped into an old rickety Sheraton arm-chair, and he resumed his own seat at the end of the table nearest the hearth, letting his eyes rest on her face searchingly for a brief moment. Her radiant freshness was almost miraculous after the anguish she had been enduring, and she met his gaze squarely. But she felt him reading beyond her superficial mask, and presently, in order to escape, looked away round the room with simulated interest, taking in with a leisurely, though comprehensive movement of her head the mass of comic coloured prints that hung above the mantel, itself crowded with cards, photographs and bits of old china (mostly chipped and broken); the tall Empire bureau, in the alcove at the side of the hearth, stuffed and laden with a most remarkable chaos of letters and papers; the two great iron candlesticks, fantastically wrought, that stood on a worm-eaten cedar-wood table against a faded little Persian rug hung broadwise between the two windows; and the few long shelves (across the one unbroken wall) that were packed with books—mostly mediæval, and in oak and vellum bindings—and surmounted by exquisite china.

"What a lovely untidy den!" she cried gaily. "And will you give me some of the hospitality, please—I mean the golden virtue? How happy you must be here!"

He produced a cup and saucer from an unsuspected cupboard in the wall, carefully dusted them, and poured out her tea.

"Happy here?" he echoed. "When fortified by excess of virtue, otherwise——"

He broke off, and strode round the room expressively.

"How sad!" she exclaimed. "Then why don't you give it up?"

"Give it up? This philosopher's garret!" He continued his striding. "Well, for the sake of the wet misty nights. I like to have the room dark, and to sit after midnight at the open window with a terrific down-pour from the suggestion of inky sky one feels up above the mist. Those buildings opposite loom so darkly and softly, and then I feel I am high up in one of those tall narrow side-streets off the Boulevards. This Jermyn Street, with a little imagination, does seem Parisian. An occasional hansom dashes through below, but up here it is so mystically silent and solitary that one feels in touch with the infinite. And the pour, pour continues, and the mist grows thicker, and the universe is so beautiful. And there I stay watching till the dawn."

"I shiver at the thought of it."

She did shiver, and pulled her cloak closer over her shoulders.

"But how about the fine dry nights?" she asked, after a moment.

"When I come to think of it, those are equally good," he declared. "The feeling of London that then comes to me from below is that of a dead city, of the capital of some ancient empire that passed away thousands of years ago—a sort of superb Pompeii, in fact, reconstructed and revived specially for me. I often have the same feeling as I pass through it. The countless multitudes of people are all dead and shrivelled and long

since passed back into the dust. But they are all so happily ignorant of it!"

She shivered again. "How weird!"

"So you see, whether it's wet or fine, this garret has its consolations."

"But what about the mornings? After meditating all night long like that, you must get up fearfully late."

"Not later than when I go out to some party or other."

"What time did you get up on the Thursday of the week before last?" she asked.

"Oh, I did not mean to be personal," he laughed. "But to answer your question—I slept very soundly, indeed, was up refreshed by ten, and ate a most hearty breakfast."

"I am sorry to hear that," she said.

He looked at her sharply, but she was sipping her tea and her head was bent forward, her hat largely concealing her features. He could not see her eyes, but her cheeks were redder. Suddenly she threw her head back and broke into laughter.

"My appetite both vexes and amuses you—apparently," he grumbled.

"Your appetite annoyed me shockingly, I admit. But my amusement was due to an odd memory."

"Odd memories are the most amusing things in the world."

"You used to oversleep when I was a child—I heard you telling uncle about it one morning, just when you were about to leave England. You put it down to a demon, and gave me a terrible fright."

"Ah, I remember, too." He threw himself again into the great arm-chair. "Those must have been happy days for you."

"You were more chivalrous then, certainly more sentimental."

"I am certainly ever so much more sentimental now," he declared; "and I hope I am not less chivalrous. Then I was a hardened cynic."

"Now you are gentler, I know," she said. "But in

those days you believed in broken rings and plighted troths and everlasting fidelity, whereas now——”

“I believe in broken hearts as well.”

“Whereas now you eat big breakfasts. I repeat your appetite is disgraceful, and it annoys me.”

“Rather than that I withdraw it and the slumber, too. I thought the fib would please you—for fib it was! I sat at the open window that Thursday till long after dawn.”

“You were thinking, no doubt, of the little joke you had played off on me, and the glorious way I was caught by it.”

“I wasn’t as proud of the joke as all that,” he murmured.

They sat silent. They sipped their eternal tea.

“Let me pour you another cup,” he said suddenly.

She did not refuse, and he filled his own as well.

“It was mean of me to pretend the thing was only a little joke—wasn’t it?” she asked.

“Why, wasn’t it a joke?”

“No fencing,” she warned him.

He considered a moment. “It shall be whatever you wish.”

“It *was* mean of me,” she insisted.

“Merciful!”

The new cups of tea were standing. Simultaneously they raised them to their lips as if both struck simultaneously by the fear that the liquid might cool.

“Do you know, I am perfectly sick of the London season,” she broke out abruptly. “I wish I were hundreds of miles away from it!”

“Surely the wish is easy to realize.”

“But I want other things to go with it. It is entirely a different kind of life I want from what I have hitherto been leading. I want to do something for poor people—to help them, and make them happier. I was walking with uncle to-day, and we saw such a terrible wreck of a poor woman. Uncle thought I despised her. Now I really didn’t—though I said something superior that I didn’t mean a bit. You understand?”

"Your philanthropic ambitions do you credit," he said dryly.

"You have heard the talk about us?" she exclaimed quickly, immediately catching the implication of his tone.

"Well, yes," he admitted. "I confess I have had the honour this evening of throwing, not a glass of wine, but a huge tankard of excellent stout in the face of an extremely good-natured old fellow, who, I am sure, has never harmed a fly in his whole life, and to whose stupid ancient head and breezy laughter I am indebted for much entertainment. Now I am to be sat upon by the club committee."

"And so you came home to console yourself with tea!" Her eyes glistened tearfully.

He saw she was moved. "My dear little girl," he said affectionately. "Don't let the thing bother you at all. You will not be on people's tongues for more than a day or two—they take it as a good joke more than anything else. You will be happy in spite of it."

"Nobody at home knows anything yet, and I hope it won't reach their ears. I fancy aunt won't find out unless she meets with some unkindness, and who would be rude enough to tell her? But *our* fashionable existence was doomed all the same—uncle, I more than suspect, had already made up his mind about that! And in any case Gwenny was going into a convent soon. Happy soul!" she sighed.

"Your domestic politics are not entirely unfamiliar to me," said Preston. "However, since we are talking so frankly, and I am after all one of your oldest friends, may I suggest that it would not be out of place if you were even a shade more frank with me. There is one point, for instance, on which you have not yet enlightened me."

"As usual—there is no hiding secrets from you. As for that—it is broken off. I am glad. See, my hands are quite steady!" She held up her cup firmly. "And now, Mr. Wizard, you *will* help me to live the kind of life I want—won't you?"

"So far as I possibly can."

"That is nice of you. I want to live very simply, but far, far away from this hateful London, and to be a sort of Lady Bountiful—to do good to as many people who are worth it up to my full powers. I have a small fortune, as you know."

"Why not be guided by Hubert? Surely your idea would delight him!"

"Because I want the idea to delight you. Don't *you* approve of it?"

"I always approve of whatever delights Hubert."

"Thank you." She set her cup down on the table, and, leaving her cloak on her chair, she came over and stood by the hearth, smiling in all the freshness of her beauty. Her eyes wandered round the room again, dwelling once more, for an instant, on the iron candlesticks that stood on the cedar-wood table against the Persian rug. Then she turned to him again. "Now, not so very many evenings ago," she resumed, "you were good enough to consent to confide in me, but we agreed at the time that the confidence should be treated as a joke—the same joke which we have just now agreed is to be taken seriously after all. Well, in return, may I not confide in you?"

"Not a new joke this?"

"No, indeed!" She opened wide coquettish eyes. Then she turned her face away from him again, and idly examined the bric-à-brac on the mantelshelf. "Well," she continued; "once upon a time, a long while ago, I lost my heart to a brave knight. He was going on a long pilgrimage, and I solemnly promised to be his sweetheart true for life. We divided a ring, each keeping half. If he will claim me again, he will find me ready to redeem my promise."

She wound up all breathlessly. She was red now, and her hands were no longer steady.

"My dear child, you are by far too generous. The brave knight, as you are kind enough to call him, would be mean indeed if he were not to absolve you from so rash a promise, made, indeed, at so immature a period of your existence."

"I am disappointed. The promise has the full ratification and approval of the very mature person who has enjoyed two large cups of your beautiful hospitality."

"The knight cannot lend *his* approval to it," he answered sternly.

"But he approved of it only a short time since," she argued. "And besides, he has already expressed his approval of the conditions as to the sort of existence he and I may lead together."

"The conditions are fascinating, but the circumstances are not the same as they were—a short time since, that is."

"Why, how have they changed so soon?"

"Then, you were called upon to decide! And you would have decided with your eyes open, prepared to accept the sequel. Now——"

"Now——" she murmured, her face white at last, and all the ghastly worried look in undisputed possession.

"The knight would scarcely be worthy of his knight-hood if, the onus and responsibility of decision being now upon him, he were to take advantage of a temporary mood due to vexatious circumstances, and thrust the sequel upon you. For you to have accepted him then would have been a very different thing. Now that the responsibility falls upon him, he has a conscience."

"I do not fear the sequel."

"He has a conscience," he repeated doggedly.

There was a long silence. Preston swallowed the remainder of his cup at a draught. The girl's fingers played nervously with a little silver lion on the mantel.

"Then you won't marry me?" she said.

"I am not such a selfish brute," he answered.

Abruptly she left the hearth, took her cloak, and again slipped it across her shoulders.

"Good-night," she said, holding out her hand stiffly. Her lips, as they closed, were drawn hard. Her form was proudly erect. In that one instant, he felt, as he caught the chill look on her face, she had drawn a thousand miles away from him.

"Good-night," he returned quietly. She barely gave him time to touch her fingers with his own.

"Please don't see me down—I shall find my way out."

He respected the request, knowing she desired to escape from him at once. And in a moment he was sitting in his deep arm-chair, staring hard at nothing.

He scarcely knew how long the interval was, but the sound of the slamming of the street-door came up to him abruptly, and he started up violently, haunted by the terrible expression of despair on her face as she had swept out of the room, and suddenly remembering how her mother had ended.

XVII

WHEN May found herself in the street again, she stood still for an instant in complete mental darkness. But presently remembrance and decision came to her, and, with a quick, nervous movement, she pulled her cloak closer round her and began to walk towards St. James's-street. At the corner, she stepped into a hansom, and ordered the driver to take her to Waterloo.

As the vehicle rattled off, she shrank back into her seat as if with an instinctive fear of being recognized in some sudden glare of illumination. For the streets were in their full evening bustle. Hansoms were dashing about in hundreds, the side-walks were thronged, the club-houses were lighted up. In the Haymarket the theatres flared, and the sounds that reached her were as of a whole population astir.

And then she fell a-brooding on Preston's weird fancy, and it veritably seemed to her this was the swarming capital of some ancient mighty Empire that had long since crumbled into the dust; that she herself was flying through it in dream to be restored to some other life that was her true life, and towards which her mind was straining in a vain effort of memory.

She found pleasure in abandoning herself to the imagining, for there was nothing else in the world that called for her attention.

She had thought to carve her worldly way imperiously, to gratify herself with pleasure, and with realized desires and ambitions; but fate had laughed at her!

Life on her own terms had been refused to her; she would not accept it on any other terms! She would die with her pride unbroken!

Idly her eye took in the ghostly far-off spectacle of the town. Yet now and again, as the despair in her soul came up overwhelmingly, she caught her breath with a half-moan, and her eyes were blinded by a mist.

When the hansom drew up at Waterloo station, she resumed control of herself again, paying the driver his fare and buying her ticket with her usual assurance. A Lynford train would be starting in a few minutes ; she knew it well, as Hubert, when detained late at his chambers, had often come home by it.

After an interval of dazed waiting on the platform with a strange, slumbrous sense of the vast echoing terminus, she watched the train glide up slowly, and presently she took her seat. She was glad to find herself alone in the dim compartment when at last it started off again. Then came the plunge into the weary suburban darkness, amid which showed a grey wilderness of houses and factories, punctured with blinking points of light, and varied by the long glare of some suburban High Street as they swept over a bridge that spanned it.

On, on, the train danced and beat ; the lights and the dark masses of buildings grew rarer, and at length they were running through black landscapes. The night was moonless but starry. The overpowering closeness of the town and suburbs was replaced by a freer feeling of air and space.

For a time she lay back against the cushions, conscious at last of a throbbing fatigue in her limbs. But she eventually threw off the torpor, and went to stand by the open window. She liked the grey, moving hedges, the weird trees, the mysterious depths of the landscapes and of the heavens. How smoothly and evenly the train ran through them, penetrating—penetrating. Were they not making direct for that bright star, twinkling at her so invitingly, low down on the horizon ?

Then suddenly the thought of her purpose rushed back on her, and, drawing her breath hard, she felt cut as by a knife, and her hand went up to her breast. To breathe at all she was constrained to exercise force in

defiance of the pain. "Oh, my crushed heart!" she moaned; "Oh, my crushed heart!"

And presently she fell again into her seat, and her eyes that had known no tears since she had left home were now wet, and she could not check her sobs.

The great, cool shadows brooded softly over the stretches of hill and field, but could bring her no calm.

But, like everything else, the fit of weeping ran its course, and she relapsed for the rest of the journey into a stony resigned indifference. The proximity of Lynford was at length indicated to her by the familiar little wayside stations, dreary and deserted, at which the train made momentary stoppages. Already she began to arrange her hat so that it might overshadow her face the more, for, though she knew it was an idle fear that anybody about the station might recognize her, she was yet anxious to attract as little notice as possible. She had been well known to the station-master in the olden days, but of course she had grown and changed, and, besides, she would slip out of the station very quickly.

And so, when the train finally pulled up at Lynford, she was able to escape without observation, just as she had anticipated. Her carriage came to a stand near the exit, and she gave up her ticket and passed out briskly, barely conscious that some half-a-dozen other passengers had alighted, and were straggling along the platform behind her.

The little town was already asleep. Her own foot-fall alarmed her as she hastened along the shuttered High-street to get to the country road. Every now and again she would catch the sound of voices, and soon after would come upon little groups of men and women chatting at some wayside corner. But to her high-strung mood they scarcely seemed real. London had become the reality again, and this only the dream. The lighted dining-room at Portland Place, the glare and hubbub and dash of Piccadilly Circus, the crowded houses of their friends—these all thrust themselves up before her in living vividness. There in London pulsed the blood

of life, the lights flared, the hansoms rattled, the news-boys shouted. That was reality—splendid reality that beat itself against one. This was all a shadow, part of the greater shadow that brooded above and around and into which it all merged—this dim agglomeration of silent, sleeping, tortuous streets and ghostly chimney-stacks; a fading vision seen by preoccupied attention, a hesitating suggestion whispered into the ear of a sleeper!

Soon she had traversed the full length of the High-street. The pavement ended; the road twisted and turned between homes that slept in sweet silence amid old gardens behind high, mossy walls. The lamps grew rarer. And, the last isolated house once left behind her, she distinguished with difficulty the stretch of the roadway. The whole countryside lay gloriously free and vast under a multitude of stars, and she was conscious of the sweet hill-sides that stretched in the distance in great undulations. But only the dusky-grey hedges were softly visible on either hand as she stepped along. The air was still.

She was sure of her way, and at that hour—it was near mid-night—she was hardly likely to meet anybody. So her pace slackened and her feet went on mechanically, the whilst she again lapsed into a daze, a mental emptiness, till she was startled out of it by the rumbling along of a belated cart. As soon as it had well passed her by, she came away from the hedge against which she had crouched, and pursued her way. But, somehow, the break had made a difference. She was trembling now—she knew not why—and she was glad to rest against a barred gate, that was all wet from the dew. Her fingers, her ears, her feet were burning, her knees were beating together. “Oh my crushed heart, oh my crushed heart!” was all she could think, all she could murmur.

She closed her eyes till the pain should pass, but, after a moment or two, she abruptly began to go forward again. What a pity there was no moon to-night! was her sudden thought. She had come specially to see

the old garden again in the moonlight, to visit for the last time the favourite nooks of her childhood, those she had so often haunted when she had stolen from her bed on summer nights with only a cloak round her, and had gone down just to see what was happening. At night-time, she had been wont to fancy that it was entirely a different region from the garden of her play-hours. She felt a keen disappointment at the prospect that her journey might be vain, then laughed at herself for being capable of such an emotion. What mattered the journey, the little extra bustle and energy . . . *By the morning it would be all the same !*

Soon she struck off the main-road that led ultimately to the front of the old house, and took the rougher by-road that ran downwards to the hidden little gate, of her first coming to which, in her childhood, she had still a vivid remembrance. Here she seemed to be plunging into even intenser darkness. The dim, fantastic trees hung over her head. She stumbled each moment in the deep ruts and over the invisible inequalities of the way.

At last she arrived at the slippery steps that led to the well-known gate. As the house had never yet been re-occupied, she was not intruding on strangers. A faint feeling of exhilaration came over her as she stood once more in the thick of the little plantation. She could almost have imagined that the last few years had never been, and she was happy amid everything and everybody she loved, and was now merely at her favourite nocturnal pranks.

Yes, it was good to feel she was here at last, with the smell of the pines in her nostrils. It made her feel she had not come in vain, despite the pitchy darkness. If the whole place were not bound to be so weed-grown by now, she would not even have lamented the absence of moonlight.

Yes, yes, she was glad she had come, she kept repeating. She felt suddenly she had it all to herself—this wild, sweet garden. She forgot she had been faithless to it ; once again it had taken the place it had had

in the affections of her childhood. She held out her arms with an all-embracing sweep; it was splendid to think that she was mistress of it all to-night, free to wander and to linger where she listed, and not a soul to interrupt her mood. Souls! There seemed to be none within a hundred miles of her. What a wild joy to be again amid these glorious pine-trees, to be knee-deep in the tangled field, to be treading the old lawns, and exploring all the mysterious paths amid the familiar shrubberies!

She laughed softly to herself—it was the pleased laugh of a happy child, yet had in it some ring of insanity.

By old habit she was now traversing a favourite route. She could have found her way blindfold, so familiar was she with every tree and mound and stone. She skirted the tangled field, steered through the pines, and went across the lawn. Her shoes were by now wet through and through, yet she was scarcely aware of it.

But as, at last, she came close to the shuttered empty house, her curiosity about it vanished, and she shrank away from the dark mass, thrust back by its desolateness. The thought, too, of the remainder of the garden that lay beyond it made her shudder. In their childhood she and her sister had shunned it as a forlorn, mysterious region, and had whispered each other gruesome imaginings about it. Now that old feeling surged up again, and the house and all that lay beyond seemed given up to vague demons, eerily at home in the dim corners. And not a human soul within a hundred miles of her!

Back she went with her spirits dulled again. Why didn't the moon come out and silver the tangled field and border it with the shadows of the pine-trees? Why didn't the wind blow music among the branches? Where was the nightingale?

She halted at length by an old fallen trunk that lay at the foot of a great solitary elm, and had been preserved for her own special behoof as an agreeable touch of nature. It had always made such a lovely seat, and now she found with surprise that she was glad at the idea of

resting there awhile. She sank down, propping her back against the tree behind.

Her limbs seemed broken with fatigue. The strange energy which had carried her through these last hours fell away. She closed her eyes and her head drooped.

Thus she remained seated, only shifting her position to settle her back more comfortably against the rugged elm that spread its foliage far overhead. Ah, how weak and tired she felt, how good it was to rest a moment!

Poor dear Hubert! She had not really meant to vex him. . . . But perhaps it was just as well. No, no, she did not quite mean that, only when one ran away to put an end to one's self it was appropriate there should be as much bitterness as possible. The next moment she was crying softly. And Preston, too—how foolish of him not to marry her when he loved her! She could have got on quite well with him, too. And as for Arthur Roburne—well, perhaps she had deceived herself and had never cared for him at all. But what was the use of thinking about these things? There was nothing for her to live for anyway. . . . And how untidy Preston's rooms were! What fun it would have been pretending to want to put them straight for him—just to see how cross he'd have got about it! . . . "The faded rug on his wall, with those two monster candlesticks in front, is really very artistic—makes a sort of shrine. Now I think the rug in the MacFarlane's hall is horrible—it shines so, just like a sleek brilliant cat. . . . The James's concert wasn't much of a success, but I don't see how they could have expected anything better. Helen's voice is pretty enough, but she never has *worked*, and her brother is a little too hard and bangy. I like a soft fluidity, something with melody in it, but nothing sad. . . . Now that there is a breeze, it seems quite chill."

She huddled closer against the elm, opened her eyes a moment on the vague spaces, then closed them immediately. Her mind wandered off again, darting here and there, recalling comic incidents of their travels, and jumping from *table-d'hôte* at Milan to her first day at school

in London, or from lunch at Mrs. Drummond's to that awful moment of her childhood when she had dropped the prism, temporarily borrowed for a spy-glass from the lustre that was the pride of her mother's mantelpiece.

And as the girl crouched there in the soft night, she finally passed into a half-dozé. Yet she was still conscious of her thoughts, now passing into living pictures, with fantastic touches of invention against which her reason made no protest. Occasionally her hand pulled up her slipping cloak as the breeze blew cooler. And the procession of images continued.

The hours went by. Sometimes, as though cramped, she shifted her position automatically, stretched her stiff, tired limbs. Sometimes her lips murmured words, sometimes she spoke out aloud. There were moments, too, amid the grotesquerie of her dreams when her thoughts were vividly logical to her.

"I hate your peacocks and chrysanthemums and goody-goody saints, and your Lancelots and King Arthurs," she called out suddenly, launching into æsthetic declamation. "Give me a picture with the artist's own inspiration. . . . Ah, Sir Lancelot, why are you standing over me? Do you take me for a beautiful maiden lost in the wilderness? . . . Did you say 'yes'—did I hear you say 'yes'?" she exclaimed excitedly.

Her eyes opened in her sleep and rested vaguely on the shadowy figure that seemed to flit back and melt into the darkness. Then they closed again, and, as the breeze rose once more, she began talking to herself again. "Oh, I must fly away, if you *will* go on with that music. Why, you never seem to play anything save those strange unhappy Russian masters. They affect me too deeply and send me all into discords. . . . Ah!" She shivered. "No, no, I can't bear the elusive emotion of those wonderful Russians. A soul in pain seems to be trying to make itself heard all through the music. Give me music that makes me think of the laugh of a happy child." Then as the breeze died away: "That's better, thank you—how much warmer I feel! It was so cold

just now. I love dear soft colours and beautiful children and lovely palaces and dances and fun. No more cold music, but warm music—warm, warm ! ”

The moon came out late and shone on all the landscape. The house looked less desolate, as if the demons had gone elsewhere. Soon the dawn came—a gentle, dreamy dawn, with the universe wrapped in gentle meditation, and the pale crescent lingering.

The light was quite strong when May started abruptly to her feet. Her head was a-throb, and she stood up with pain. Ah ! she remembered all. How foolish to have gone to sleep in that ridiculous fashion !

In annoyance, she took out her watch. It was a quarter-past four. She knew that, in less than half-an-hour, the early London express would dash through Lynford station, and, by walking sharply, she would have just easy time to get there. The station was the nearest point on the railway, so she must hurry away at once. Not even a porter would be about, and the signal-man could not possibly see her from his box, if she waited under the covered part of the platform—which, at this usually quiet station, was accessible at all times.

An express at fifty miles an hour gives you no time to think or suffer. It goes like a tempest, you time yourself to the second, shut your eyes, jump, and the “you” is at an end !

The thought excited her more, and she set her lips tight as she pressed forward briskly.

Very soon she was following the main road back to the little town, but she looked neither to right nor left, ignoring the rolling green hillsides flooded with fresh morning sunlight. Her mind was obsessed by the thought of the goal to which she was pressing, by the picture of the swift-flying roaring train and her own annihilation.

She covered the ground without any slackening. There was not even an early wagon to trouble her. In the town, now that it was day, she took a short cut through back streets till she struck the railway at the point she had in mind—a level crossing just out of the station. The points—

man had already closed the gates for the passage of the express. But a covered flight of steps leading to a subway was just at the side, and, arrived at the bottom, one could either pass along the subway or ascend another flight on to the platform. But, as an extra precaution against observation on the part of the pointsman, May preferred to wait just at the bottom of the steps. There she could hear the roaring of the train in ample time to ascend to the platform at the exact moment.

In a minute or so she heard it afar off—miles, perhaps—and trembled a little in spite of herself. But only for a second. For she felt wonderfully calm again as slowly she began to mount the steps, staying ultimately on the threshold of the platform ready to hurl herself forward.

But suddenly she fancied she heard a footstep, and, glancing round sharply, she beheld a gentleman emerging from a waiting-room a few yards off. She stood rigid, her heart throbbing convulsively, her bewildered, frightened eyes gazing full at him, though she saw nothing save a burning, palpitating mist. Yet she was aware he was coming straight towards her, and, as her vision cleared, she saw he was smiling at her. Then he raised his hat with one hand, and held out the other to her. In that moment she recognized him.

"You!" she gasped.

"I was afraid you weren't going to recognize me," said Preston blandly.

"Oh!" She drew her breath. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you; to tell you that, immediately I had let you go last night, I repented of—well, of the way our conversation had ended. May I hope it is not too late for me to go back upon what I then said to you?"

She was not yet mistress enough of herself to reply to him. There was a tense silence.

"Although a few hours have already passed since," he continued pleadingly, "I must really claim that my repentance was almost instantaneous. We both travelled

here by the same train, in fact. I lost you at this end, and found you in the dark by accident just when I was beginning to suppose you must have gone to some of your friends. Of course I had to respect your slumbers."

Ah! She remembered she had vaguely fancied some shadowy knight was standing over her in her sleep.

"You came to watch over and to save me!" she cried.

He bowed his head anxiously.

"I stayed in your neighbourhood, hovering about like a ghost, for several hours—you were sleeping so deeply I hadn't the heart to wake you. I dared not, in fact. Later on, I wandered back here to amuse myself with the time-tables, and was just now on the point of starting out again, somehow expecting to find you still in the happy land of dreams."

The girl stood in troubled emotion; she tried to speak further, but the words stuck in her throat.

"Will you not let me put the remainder of my life at your service?" he asked.

He stood before her with expectant face. He was handsome and stalwart.

"I know it is presumptuous of me," he added; "but perhaps you may not entirely regret it."

The roar of the train sounded nearer, mingling confusedly with the turmoil in her brain. She bowed her head, and the glint of the morning sunlight seemed to beckon to her blithely. At least he would love her faithfully till death!

"Yes," she murmured. "If you think I am worth it!"

He seized both her hands in protest, and, with a great rocking and roaring, the express came thundering along, swift as a tempest.

XVIII

THE interview in the convent parlour had occupied hardly a minute or two, but it was already obvious to Hubert that there was nothing to detain him further. The uncomfortable silence in the dim, frosty light of the plain, business-like apartment, the affable smile of the Mother Superior, his own uneasy cough—these were all indications that the simple procedure for installing Gwenny as a novice at this scholastic house in the far East End of London had now been completed. Hubert was impelled to rise to bid the girl good-bye. Already she was wearing the little black lace cap of her novitiate which the Mother Superior had just handed to her, and she came forward to lift her lips to his. Her face was infinitely subdued, and there were tears in her eyes. The next moment Hubert was trying to walk firmly through a long, winding corridor and across the flag-stones of the roomy entrance-hall.

As the convent door closed behind him, his eyes flinched before the strong daylight. He stood bewildered for an instant, then, collecting himself, he glanced about him with a piqued interest in this quiet old side-street. Stretching from a great main thoroughfare (that changed its name often in the miles of its course) towards the swarming region of Limehouse and the Docks, it was curiously heterogeneous in its huddled succession of buildings. Warehouses, huge and strangely silent, with cranes in repose, alternated with plain brick dwelling-houses of the eighteenth century and earlier, and there were other structures with mysterious barred and frosted windows that defied the prying imagination.

Not far removed from here, as Hubert knew, were

domestic areas of comparative affluence, where flourished the comfortable and often spacious homes of manufacturers, wharfingers, merchants, tradespeople, and high-placed dock officials. The convent, an old-world pile of simple Gothic aspect, situate at so excellent a point of vantage, could count among its pupils the daughters of such of these well-to-do families as were of the Catholic faith, whilst its sisters worked quietly in the vast fields of poverty that offered themselves on every hand.

But Hubert could not fix his mind for long on these streets, however fascinating their appeal. Though he had been all along at peace about Gwenny's chosen future, the excitement of the actual moment of parting had proved greater than he had anticipated. As he had bowed himself smilingly out of the room and caught a last glimpse of her, he had had a pang of terrible regret (immediately suppressed as selfish) for not having snatched at the chance of keeping her at home which she had offered him on her sister's wedding-day. "Will you not let me stay with you, uncle, now that May has gone?" she had whispered, as, hand-in-hand, they watched the bridal pair drive out of sight. He had been moved almost to tears, but he had not cared to take advantage of an impulsive moment of emotion, and interfere now with what she had set her heart on so deeply—how deeply intuition alone enabled him to divine. So his refusal had taken the form of persuasion, he pointing out that, according to the way they had finally planned out things, she could scarcely be said to be leaving them at all.

And, indeed, he was fain to repeat this argument to himself to-day. After all, the parting was very far from being so absolute as it might well have been; for had she not, with excellent sense, allied her faith with the most practical issues possible? Moreover, it was more than likely that, in a few months' time, Constance and he would be able to come into close touch with her activities—for why should not their own work be chosen in the very district? Heaven knew there was

ample room for everybody! And until that time (when his arrangements for retiring from the practice of his profession should have been completed) Gwenny would be accessible to them whenever they might desire to see her.

Yet, despite all these considerations, it was hard to force himself away from here, and it was only the thought of the uselessness of lingering that finally urged him onward. In the open main road he mounted a passing omnibus that was going citywards, and for a time found distraction in the interest of the journey itself.

He knew that, when the poignant emotion of the moment should have passed away, he would be as contented in mind as he had ever looked forward to being. Indeed, it was curious now to reflect that, at the very moment his unhappiness was at its greatest, events had ripened ready to play into his hands with incredible swiftness. First had come that astonishing revelation of discord between the three beings whom he had imagined perfectly united. And, almost immediately after, the nightmare in which he had been living had suddenly vanished of itself.

* * * * *

May's flight that memorable evening three months before had happily caused no flutter in the household; merely because, in the evening, she was assumed to have retired early, and, in the morning, just as Hubert had finished dressing and was about to descend, the servant brought him a telegram in which May announced she was staying with the Williams's for a day or two and they were very glad to have her. This was the first indication of her absence from home. Hubert, indeed, was at first inclined to doubt his own sanity, then suspected some practical joke; but investigation with the aid of the hurriedly summoned Constance placed the genuineness of the telegram beyond a doubt. Naturally they were both perplexed, though Constance could throw no light at all on this apparently meaningless escapade. But Hubert instinctively understood that May was

enacting some secret drama of her own, and he was by no means content to wait till she should deign to explain herself further. He indeed meditated following her to Lynford without any delay, and investigating the whole mysterious matter himself. But the appearance of Preston just then saved him all further anxiety.

Preston found Hubert alone, for Constance had gone back to complete her interrupted toilette. He merely smiled at the puzzled look of inquiry with which Hubert greeted this visit of his at so unearthly an hour; and the smile deepened as he caught sight of the telegram and its envelope still lying on the table.

"Congratulate me, Hubert," he said, as they shook hands. "I am engaged to be married."

In the half-hour that followed Hubert heard much to surprise him. Preston had decided to enlighten him completely, and, for the first time, Hubert was in possession of the history of May's short-lived engagement with Arthur Roburne. In the girl's natural outpouring to Preston that morning she had concealed nothing from him. His was the first sympathetic ear after those terrible days of suffering, and it eased her heart to feel she had somebody who cared as deeply as, in her inmost soul, she knew he cared. But Preston, in thus divulging, in his turn, the full sequence of events, did not consider he was violating her confidence; he had a duty to perform to Hubert, who, it was best, should know all.

When Hubert expressed his astonishment that Constance had said not a word to him about all the evil gossip (at which he himself could well afford to smile), Preston was rightly able to surmise that in all probability she knew absolutely nothing of it.

Very soon Preston had to hurry away—he had promised, amongst other things, to send May a wire of reassurance, for she was fearful as to the consternation her disappearance must have caused at home. But he had hardly departed ere Constance came hurrying in with pale face—she had evidently been brooding over the "escapade" and seeing it in new lights.

Hubert promptly metamorphosed her emotions. Her amazement and alarm as the story was unfolded were in the end quite obscured by the intensity of her satisfaction at having so difficult a child at length definitely settled in life. She, indeed, had to pay the penalty of her former reservations with Hubert (now ridiculous before his fuller knowledge) by having to maintain the pretence she was hearing for the first time that any affection had existed between May and the patrician young diplomatist; but the new engagement was sufficient consolation for this forced hypocrisy. At Hubert's hinting that the difference in the ages of the couple was rather conspicuous, she dissented from such a view most emphatically. Preston was barely forty-five, and in the modern world a man was still young at that age. Besides, even a really great difference in the ages of people marrying passed almost without notice now-a-days. Her tremulous eager delight made him smile, though he did not feel entirely convinced.

The news that a marriage had been arranged between May Ruthven and Robert Preston had little or no effect in re-raising the family in social estimation. Preston was a crank, and this was of a piece with all his life. As for the girl, it was only to be expected that she would seize the first opportunity of selling herself for a position.

In spite of all of which the wedding took place quietly about a month later. Hubert himself had at first accepted the engagement with neither ecstasy nor misgiving; yet glad that Preston at least was happy about it, and that May, so far as he could judge, was certainly contented. But gradually he had come to have a more harmonious feeling about it; on the wedding morn his enthusiasm had matched Constance's!

The pair had gone off to spend their honeymoon in Flintshire, both being desirous of settling near Preston's favourite sister, Marian; she, indeed, having lent them her house for a time, so that they might search for a suitable one for themselves in the same county, and furnish it at their leisure. And as, during the two months that had since elapsed, the Ruthvens had been

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receiving from the couple the most lyrically-worded reports as to their extraordinary state of happiness, Hubert had been able to maintain his enthusiasm at its full pitch. After all, Preston fairly deserved his bride, and Hubert felt he could never estimate his debt to his friend's insight and his promptness in acting on it.

* * * * *

And now at last the children's lives had ceased to be bound up with his own! It was curious for him to look back to the time when his desire to make their destinies his own special concern had been frustrated by the suspicious hostility of the poor woman who had come to so pitiful an end. "Poor Agnes, poor Agnes," he could not help repeating to himself softly, and he had a solemn sense of the fleeting years of existence. How had his own fled like a dream! Well, well, the children had been entrusted to him, and the time had had to come sooner or later for their destinies to be taken out of his hands. He had no doubt made mistakes, but he had at least done his best, according to his lights. It remained for him now to gather the ends of his life together, and, with his true helpmeet to sustain him in the tasks and difficulties that the days might bring, to devote himself to following the life of service of which he had dreamed as a young man.

* * * * *

He smiled again as the figure of Lady Wycliffe swam up in his thought. That charming and sentimental friend of his had again vanished from London. Hubert had called at Arlington-street specially to inform her of May's engagement, only to learn that she had suddenly gone off to the North on the very next day after Constance's party.

That she should depart in that way without the least message for him was not in itself a matter for surprise. He had often in former years had that kind of experience with her; it had been her habit to disappear just at some interesting moment in their intimacy, and the discussion of subjects nearest to his heart would thus be cut short abruptly. But when he recalled the share she had had

in promoting the affair between May and Arthur Roburne, her departure on this occasion seemed rather an extreme example of that characteristic of hers of suddenly dropping without warning what apparently was interesting her most at the moment. But he had always tolerantly accepted her weaknesses, such as they were, and he was careful to bear in mind the exacting calls of her many friendships and charities. He did not regard her gyrations very seriously, and, in a way, they were not unamusing to him. So he supposed he must forgive her as usual—if only out of respect for her undoubted sincerity and goodness, and out of recognition of the benevolent unconsciousness with which she sinned. It was certainly the easier in the present instance to take such an indulgent view of her behaviour, inasmuch as it was merely a source of gratification to him that the marriage she had desired to promote had been foiled by the natural course of events.

However, he had contented himself with writing the news to her, marking the letter for redirection, but that did not elicit any immediate reply. It was not till the wedding morn that she gave any sign of recollecting their existence, for a small parcel, addressed to May, arrived by the first post, and proved to contain a splendid diamond necklace. Enclosed with this impulsively generous gift was Lady Wycliffe's card with "congratulations and affectionate good wishes" scribbled in her own handwriting.

But May's acknowledgment did not result in any further communication from her, and it had since remained a mystery to all of them how she had learnt the date fixed for the marriage, that having been carefully preserved as the secret of the few people concerned. For the moment at least, her ladyship had passed entirely out of Hubert's personal horizon; but he had no doubt that she would one day come sailing into it again as enthusiastically smiling as ever.

* * * * *

The train was speeding along the old familiar route to Lymford, and Hubert's thoughts turned homeward again.

He was glad his agent had failed to find a tenant for the old house these last two years. Now he should never think of parting with it. On giving up the Portland Place establishment, they had disposed of most of the furniture, keeping only sufficient to refurnish the old home as cosily as before. He loved the place for its associations ; looking back, he felt that the years spent there were the only ones that represented any realization of his conscious desires and striving, and therefore the only happiness he had known. The rest had gone their course, and that part of his life which was covered by them had merely happened—had, so to speak, been more or less forced upon him, though, of course, he had had to do his best with the duties thereby involved. He had therefore entered with zest on the work of preparing the house again for their occupation. Not only would he think of it as their home for the rest of their days (even though their contemplated activities should render necessary long periods of absence from it), but he counted on giving many a happy day in the garden to wan and sick children.

At Lynford, Armstrong was waiting for him with the trap as in the old days, and they cut through the ripe autumn country past the green meadows and the rolling hillsides. As they entered the garden-drive at last, his eye lingered with pleasure on the ivy-covered walls, the freshly-painted verandah, and the flower-laden windowsills, and he had a pleasurable picture of the quaint, snug interior. He could not help chuckling at the remembrance of the tough job Armstrong had had in reclaiming the garden, now once more that faithful servant's pride and delight.

He descended at the pretty porch, and passed through the hall, standing open from end to end, to the verandah at the back ; thence he stepped down on to the lawn that was green and smiling as ever. A sweet smell was wafted to his nostrils from his own pine-groves. Constance, who was hardly expecting him yet (for she, too, had supposed his visit to the convent would be

rather more prolonged), was busy over a flower-bed some little distance off. On catching sight of Hubert she came to meet him.

"You left her there?" she asked, in vague all-comprehensive inquiry.

He nodded. "And now we are alone together, you and I, sweetheart!"

She looked at him wistfully. "Yes, together," she murmured.

"The children have left us for always. We are childless now."

"No, no, Hubert, not childless," she answered, her eyes gleaming strangely.

His heart leapt. His eyes rested on her inquiringly. But even before she spoke again, he had divined her meaning.

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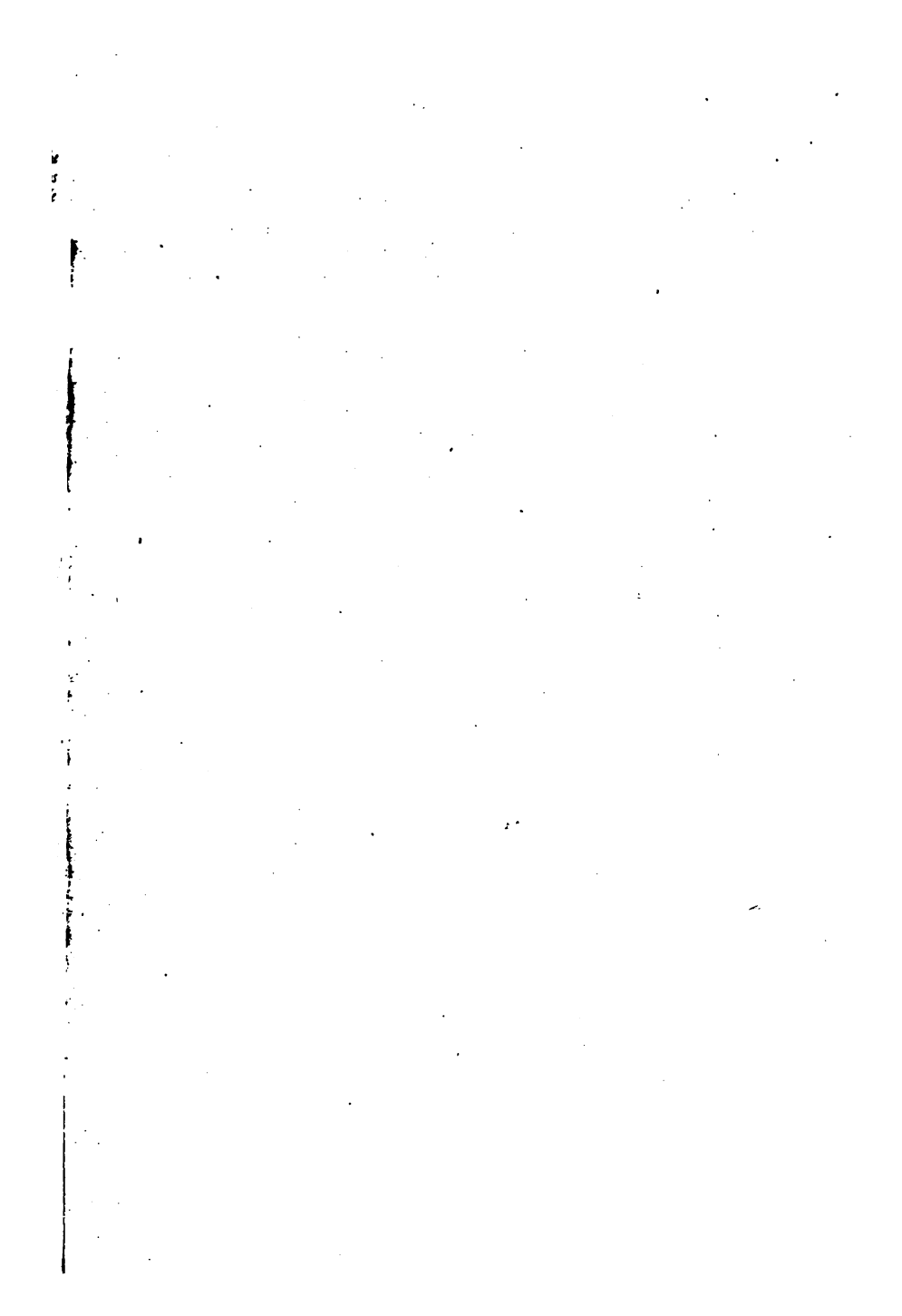
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